あざの耕平
●あざのこうへい

「神仙酒コンチェルト」でデビュー。徳島県出身。代表作として「Dクラッカーズ」「BLACK BLOOD BROTHERS」シリーズなど。作中で呪文を書くときは、間違えないよう小さな声で何度も繰り返して確認します。もちろん成田も……で、でも詠唱あらたかな呪文も唱えてるから平気ですよね？　ね？

イラスト：すみ兵
カバーデザイン：伸童舎

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東京レイヴンズ6
Black Shaman ASSAULT

あざの耕平

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東京レイヴンズ6
Black Shaman ASSAULT

思い出の中の大切な少女、北斗の正体は、夏目――？

実技合宿以来、そんな疑念が拭いきれない春虎。北斗への自分の気持ちが整理できないままの春虎は、夏目に対しても今までのように接することができず、二人の仲は次第にぎくしゃくしたものとなっていく。一方、『上巳の再祓』以降、その脅威が現実的なものとなった『D』は、陰陽庁に宣戦布告。事態を重く見た陰陽庁は『十二神将』を配置し迎撃を試みる。いち早く情報を察知した陰陽塾でも、警戒を強め、密かに準備を整えるのだが――!?

すれ違う式神と主、激しさを増す陰と陽の戦い。若き闇狗たちを取り巻く戦いは、いよいよ本格的になり!?

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あざの耕平作品集

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BLACK BLOOD BROTHERS❷1～6

東京レイヴンズ1 SHAMAN★CLAN
東京レイヴンズ2 RAVEN"s NEST
東京レイヴンズ3 cHImAirA DanCE
東京レイヴンズ4 GIRL RETURN & days in nest Ⅰ
東京レイヴンズ5 days in nest Ⅱ & GIRL AGAIN
東京レイヴンズ6 Black Shaman ASSAULT

声はまるで違うのに、ひどく似ているように感じた
――北斗の声に
東京ブラックアサルト
6
Black Shaman
ASSAULT

「魚喰め！」
未熟なのはみんな一緒で
だからこそ——

「臨、兵、闘、者、皆、陣、列、在、前――！！」
大友は旦にも止まらぬ早さで九字を結印する

目次

一章 梅雨空の下で 7
二章 挑戦状 58
三章 陰陽師、来訪す 139
四章 敵陣突破 179
五章 術比べ 256
あとがき 342

TOKYO RAVENS

Chapter

1 - Under the Rainy Season's Overcast Sky

"The essence of sorcery is lies."

"That's why it is said that when one person is cursed, two graves are dug"

-Ashiya Douman

Part 1

It was night.

Outside, it was raining lightly. One could also hear the pitter-pattering sound of the rain from the inside of the room.

At the top-most floor inside a high-class apartment in the Tokyo capital, several rooms and attics were linked together, forming a labyrinth of open space. Junk objects were laid all around, giving it a chaotic appearance.

Large segments of the windows were tightly shut. The light from an antique lamp mixed together with the surrounding ambient light to give off a warning-light kind of intensity, throbbing on and off. The irregularity of the flashing light created a sense of illusion, unknowingly affecting the five senses and gradually sending them into disarray. A damp musty odor filled the stale air, however at the same time, slight traces of a delicate fragrance drifted through as well. This weird space, filled with demonic confusing energies made one forget about the passage of time.

A man walked along the room corridor, creating soft footsteps.

Under the flashing lights, his short golden hair and face with many distinct edges and corners could be seen. He wore a casual, neat western suit without a tie. The man’s walking posture was as if he were an ancient king reviewing the labyrinth that would become his own tomb.

A lantern's flame was flickering at the man's feet, his shadow moving erratically across the ceiling of the room. A small headed lizard crawled along the wall.

The room was not only simply intricate, but it was also shielded with many heavy magic, thus changing it both physically and magically into a labyrinth. The man stopped walking several times; he showed a troubled expression, however it did not have the feeling of confusion. Up till the last moment, he did not take the wrong route, coming to his target's side.

This target was in the deepest part of the labyrinth, inside a small study.

The walls and ceiling of the study room were covered in bookshelves; there were numerous tightly-packed piles of old books and files, exotic paintings and incense, and other items of unknown purposes. Opened books and book boxes, discarded Japanese paper, and ink dried pens were scattered on the tatami mat. There was even a table lying horizontally on the floor.

That was the entire decadent study.

Suddenly, in front of the altar,

Sat a small old man, his back facing the door.

The room had no illumination; there was only the light which came from the outside corridor. The man obscured the light, leaning his elbow against the door frame, spying into the study. His right arm was leaning against the door frame; the left sleeve of the suit was dangling freely from the upper arm onwards.

The man faced the old man's back.

"Doman", he spoke with a rough voice.

The old man did not turn his head.

"Is that you?" he replied with a young voice, in contrast with his appearance.

"I heard from your shikigami that you are about to make your move."

Hearing the man's simple question, the old man clicked his tongue.

"What are you talking about."

"You can no longer wait can you?"

"What? Art thou actually concerned as well?"

"Answer my question", replied the man coldly.

From the man's sturdy body, a sound was emitted that bore no emotion; however it gradually transformed from a plain force into a compelling one while losing the wild atmosphere, and at the same time, exuding the suppressed aura of terror of a still lion.

"Ke- ke", laughed the old man.

"My objective lies elsewhere. Well, it doesn't deserve your worry."

The old man pleasantly changed the subject, with no intention of sending him away, continuing with his work on the table. The man's line of sight drifted towards the old man's hands.

The old man used a pen to write something on a paper. They were incantations. The way he carried himself did not give off the feeling of a ceremony; instead, it looked like someone who was elatedly preparing some kind of mischief. The man twisted his lips in distress.

His gaze moved away from the old man's hand towards the altar – which had items that did not match the surrounding decor.

A large rectangular object.

Then,

"But, which direction is the wind currently blowing[1]? What reason made you have a change of heart?"

“Change of heart? It was the shikigami you mentioned earlier. Because that rascal went to jump the gun. If I'm not careful, the choicest part will be taken by others.

“What do you mean by jump the gun? Hold your horses and explain yourself.”

“Wouldn’t that be too boring?”

“Come again?”

The man frowned in annoyance. With his back facing the man, the old man should not have been able to see that expression, but his back shook with laughter.

“Doing these things would be enough to relieve this old man’s boredom. That rascal’s wit has been rather stimulating. Damn that thrilling fellow. It is the only cure to save me from my eternal boredom.”

“Thrill, eh.”

The man muttered self-deprecatingly. He clearly knew about the old man’s horrible interests and how troublesome they were, but his counterpart was not the kind to listen to the opinion of another. Furthermore, these two people were not in a relationship where they would mutually advise each other.

“Correct. This is a rare opportunity. I shall give you some stimulation. 'Higekiri' has appeared”, informed the old man triumphantly.

The man snorted.

“.....It doesn’t matter”

“Ah?”

The old man finally halted his work at hand, turning his head, he looked over his shoulder at the man.

“A cold-hearted man as always. This old man has wondered since back then, what dost thou do for fun?”

“Unfortunately, I do not seek such stimulation to live.”

After giving his answer, the man left the door frame.

The old man’s face was revealed by the light entering the study. It was full of wrinkles, a mummified face that was rigid like a dead person, revealing no emotions. It was a stark contrast to hearing his young voice, which felt extremely rich.

“Oh? Then why do you continue to live? Will you wander aimlessly in the dark before falling into the demonic path?”

Hearing the old man’s question, the backlit man shrugged his shoulders.

“.....For what reason does a person live? I live therefore to find that answer.”

After that response, he turned his heel, like he had lost interest.

The man went back into the hallway; his footsteps could be heard once again. The old man watched the silhouette of the man’s back leave, before continuing with his previous work awhile later.

It was night.

The ever present sound of the falling rain continued without end.

Part 2

Several incandescent lights were connected in a row. As the visitors watched the fireworks, the sound released flickered like a small ripple.

The summer festival.

The burning smell of soy sauce, the cries of stalls greeting their guests, the distant sound of cicadas as well as the suffocating heat of the surroundings; the thick summer atmosphere was spreading through the air.

Everyone was smiling. Children ran by their feet, their voices hoarse with laughter.

However, the one with the most gorgeous smile, whose laughter was the most uplifting, was the girl wearing a yukata.

I want to eat this, I want to play that, I still want to go there. Hurry, hurry.

Her smile was as gorgeous as a sunflower.

The constant cries of her heartfelt feelings could be heard.

She turned her head around as I did my best to catch up.

A smile emerged on her mouth naturally.

The girl in front was running, looking behind several times, urging me on.

Smiled wryly and chasing the girl, feeling forced yet feeling a sense of attraction to her. It was as though every action was being compelled by her.

The back of the girl running in front. The ribbon in her hair floated back and forth. A pink-colored ribbon. Every time the ribbon swayed, her hair swayed lightly in the air.

Beautiful, waist-length black hair.

“Ah?” stopping my footsteps.

Then, the girl noticed and stopped as well.

She turned her head around, the ribbon in her black hair swaying in the wind like a gentle floating pendulum.

The girl blinked ,her big eyes filled with hope.

“What’s wrong, Harutora?”

“Natsu –“

Unconsciously making a sound, Tsuchimikado Harutora sat up in his quilt.

He was in his own room in the Onmyou Academy boarding dorm. After lights out, the room was pitch dark. In the silence, only his own breathing could be heard.

“.....Hu - “, he breathed out a long sigh to calm his breathing. The ever-present sound of raindrops could be heard from outside the window.

“H-H-Harutora-sama? Is there something wrong?”

Suddenly, Kon appeared out of nowhere and asked out of concern for her master.

“.....Nothing’s wrong” replied Harutora ambiguously, taking a deep breath again.

.....Was it a dream?

He opened his cell phone to check the time. It had just reached 3 AM. Harutora did not move a muscle, reflecting, but his brain was blank.

The rain outside continued.

Time seemed to have stopped, as though it was eternally accumulating in the room.

☆

The rhythm of the raindrops could be heard.

Blue hydrangeas bloomed brilliantly along the side of the road, absorbing the rainwater. The streets of Shibuya were foggy due to the warm rain. It was the fifth day of the raining season in the Kanto region, and this overcast and rainy weather had been continuing for the past few days.

The Omnyouji training institution, the Omnyou Academy. One of the Academy's classrooms.

The air-conditioned classroom was so comfortable that it felt like it had no relation with the wet conditions outside. However, the artificial cold air seemed so impersonal. The sound of the air-conditioner droned on through the rooms without a care.

Harutora, cheek in his hand, rested his elbow on the desk, listening to the teacher teaching from the podium.

The lecturer's voice sounded faint in the silent classroom. In front of Harutora laid his notebook. He occasionally spun his mechanical pencil about his right hand, lost in his own thoughts.

He glanced at the seat beside him.

Sitting next to Harutora was his childhood friend, Tsuchimikado Natsume. Unlike the mentally slack Harutora, she was attentively watching the podium.

Due to the head family 'family tradition', Natsume had to wear male clothing. Her face also did not have any signs of makeup. However, her profile was beautiful enough such that no makeup was needed. She did not just have good looks; the intelligence that showed from her eyes matched her excellence.

Even her straight back as she recorded the notes was elegant.

The opposite of that guy.

"....."

During the return bus trip from the practical skills training camp, an uncertainty formed within Harutora's mind. Harutora had been secretly looking at Natsume from the side. However, you would not need to pay that much attention to notice this. His eyes moved to her long black hair – tied with a pink ribbon that rested along the side of her neck.

On the bus back from the resort, a sense of suspicion had entered his heart. From that moment on, Harutora kept peeking at Natsume's ribbon.

At that time, Harutora accidentally took the ribbon and repeatedly looked at it a number of times. Even so, he ultimately was unable to remove the doubt in his heart. Even now, as he continued to secretly peek, it was still difficult to find an answer.

But,

..."Very cute isn't it?"

..."I will take good care of it."

.....

Harutora unknowingly narrowed his eyes and furrowed his brow as he stared at Natsume's ribbon. Entangled deep in his thoughts, Harutora repeatedly asked the same question a hundred times yet could not find the answer.

Could it be.

Could it be – No it can't be, but then.

"....."

Suddenly, Natsume moved – aware of that movement, Harutora quickly looked away, turning his head as far back as he could. From the edge of his vision, he saw that Natsume noticed him looking the other direction. But of course, Harutora did not give her any response. He tried to act as though nothing happened, despite his stiff neck and his rapid heart rate.

On the other hand –

Natsume, who felt someone's eyes on her, turned her head around and saw Harutora suddenly turn his head the other direction. Her beautiful face became overcast, her long eyelashes drooped down with a sense of loneliness, and her shoulders, wrapped in the school's uniform, lost its strength.

She still did not give up hope, turning her eyes to glance at Harutora again. But her childhood friend held his unnatural and rigid attitude, and kept looking in the other direction. Natsume sighed and reluctantly faced the podium again.

The faint voice of the lecturer echoed throughout the classroom. The Academy student who could hear him took their notes, the sound of their pen tips scratching against the paper.

It was still raining outside.

For some unknown reason, a depressed atmosphere filled the air within the classroom equipped with the latest air-conditioning,

Part 3

Nowadays, Harutora still adhered to training independently after school. Recently Ohtomo-sensei and former exorcist Fujiwara-sensei were with him during practice.

In some sense this can be seen as special treatment. However, in light of the plight that Natsume was facing, his training was still inadequate compared to what the others in the same course were going through. Therefore, instead of "receiving special treatment from the Omnyou Academy" it was more like Ohtomo and Fujiwara were affectionately offering him a helping hand. Obviously, this was with approval from the Academy's director.

Until now, training had focused on the fundamental skills. But ever since the training camp, practice gradually shifted to combat training.

For example, today was invisibility magic training.

This stealth technique was called the art of "Concealing one's presence". It was a magic used by Vajrayana monks, Shungedō practitioners, foreign enemies, magical beings and demons to protect themselves. It also formed the basis of ninjutsu used by ninjas that everyone knows.

“General style” invisibility is very much the same, using magic to hide one’s physical presence and aura. The main aim is to deceive the opponent’s eyes – specifically the “spirit seeing”. The technique is simple and yet very practical. After mastering this technique, one can erase their presence as easily as breathing. In the General style of Omnyou magic, it is considered a major spell.

However, invisibility magic is not an elementary magic. After all, to use this magic one must be aware of how to deceive his opponent. Having a pedestrian as an opponent as compared to having a professional Onmyouji as an opponent would require two completely different spell formulas.

On top of this, a major prerequisite for invisibility magic is the perfect mastery over one’s own aura. Also, when using this magic, the magical energy used to maintain the invisibility magic must also be concealed. If one cannot adequately control their own magical energy, it would be impossible to achieve this spell.

Because one must be able to utilize these basic techniques, the mastery of one’s aura and proper control of their magical energy, without hindrances, there is a phrase in the working world, “How well one uses invisibility magic is what separates the professionals from the layman.”

Obviously for an ordinary academy student like Harutora, It is impossible to learn this spell in an instant.

This thought could not help but come to mind.

“Leaving aside shikigami like Kon, I am just a flesh and blood human! Obviously I cannot become transparent, so how can I simply just disappear?”

“Natsume was able to do it, so did Kyouko.”

“How can I compete against them!”

“Don’t say it that way. Should we find ourselves in the situation where we need to use the invisibility spell, we would be lucky if our ‘opponent’ is just an ‘ordinary’ professional.”

After hearing to Harutora's complaints, his evil friend teasingly stated the facts. He was Ato Touji, who also took part in the self-training. After finishing their self-training at the magic practice field, the two of them left the changing room.

"Well it's convenient for you. All you need to do is strengthen my father's seal and you'll be able to conceal your aura."

"At the same time my own aura would be stopped by the seal. In the end, that move can only be used in emergency situations."

"Anyway, as long as it can be used in critical moments it is good enough. As for me, I don't have the mood to restart training all over from scratch."

Harutora's aura was much stronger compared to ordinary people. Despite being from a branch family, he still was of the Tsuchimikado bloodline and thus he would naturally have a powerful magical force.

However, the only significance of having a purely powerful aura was that it was very conspicuous to spiritual senses. Using invisibility magic to conceal your own aura still required the appropriate level of skill.

Furthermore, Harutora who has a strong aura cultivated a habit of converting his spiritual energy into magic in his daily life. Controlling his spiritual energy for invisibility magic however was his weakness.

On the other hand, Touji had an Oni dwelling inside him, mixing the Oni's aura with his own. His spirit aura was glaring, for a different reason compared to Harutora.

But Touji's seal was meant to control his Oni. When he decides to use the Oni's strength, the seal's restriction is lifted. Currently he is learning how to control the Oni's aura. All he needed to do was to reverse the strength of seal and his own aura would be hidden and sealed away.

"Well, didn't the teachers already say? All you need to do is grasp the initial trick for invisibility and then you would be able to do it. It's a lot of trial and error."

Touji tried to comfort Harutora,

“Right Natsume?”

As he turned to Natsume by his side, seeking her advice.

Harutora stiffened slightly.

Since the start Natsume was standing by his side, just that he was not talking to her – it was more like he could not talk with her. Harutora was doing his best to avoid acknowledging Natsume’s presence. Although the current situation just made him more aware of it……

Harutora stole a peek at Natsume who was beside him.

If it was the old Natsume, she would have immediately started nagging him. Whenever Harutora complains, he would immediately be submerged in a long sermon about “how you should to prepare yourself mentally before you even talk about the technique”.

However,

“……ah, yes. As long as you grasp the essentials, I think it’s good enough.”

, was Natsume’s short and honest reply.

Because she inadvertently glanced at Harutora’s expression, Natsume shyly dipped her head. She was pretending to be calm on the outside, but from an outsider’s perspective one can easily see the tension within her heart. Or could it be that it was Harutora’s misconception? It was probably because Harutora was harboring an inner turmoil that caused the misconception.

“Re, really? If Natsume says so then it’s most likely true.”

, replied Harutora, trying his best to keep his tone as natural as possible.

“Apparently magic control is really important?”

“Yes. Eventually Harutora, you would be able firmly control your own aura …….”

“What? I think that’s still too difficult. For now let’s just focus on overcoming the current problem.”

“Ah……”

While this was a normal conversation between them with nothing out of the ordinary. It probably was not a conversation “between himself and Natsume”. The atmosphere between the two of them felt very stiff, and the root cause of it was without question because of the doubt in Harutora’s heart.

-The doubt that had arose during the return bus trip from the training camp.

His dear friend, Hokuto, who was actually a shikigami– could the person controlling her be Natsume? – It was this question. –How could it be…… As he used that statement to laugh off at the question.

Thinking about it normally, it was just impossible –Harutora thought to himself. In fact, during the end of the training camp when his classmate Kurahashi Kyoko raised this possibility, the idea wracked Harutora with laughter. In Harutora’s heart, that possibility was just too unrealistic.

That was before he noticed that Natsume and Hokuto used the same ribbon.

-No. As long as I see what is before me how do I stop these thoughts?

Their height is about the same. No, Hokuto is probably slightly shorter. There is a big difference between their voices. Hokuto’s voice was huskier. As for the other aspects, there’s still speaking habits, small subconscious actions, rich facial expressions, and that child-like smile. Natsume’s aspects and Hokuto’s aspects endlessly intertwined back and forth in Harutora’s head.

While Harutora was pondering in silence, the trouble making Touji had no intention of interrupting his thoughts. Generally, this evil friend has always been very good at reading the atmosphere of the moment; however at this time he had

a confused look on his face, scratching the headband on the top of his head. After all, since the training camp, Harutora and Natsume have become uncoordinated and uncongenial.

At least look at Natsume's face while talking to her…..

- "Tell me that I'm cute"

"……"

He still could not do it. He was not able to look at Natsume and talk to her in any way. He clearly wanted to say something, however whenever their eyes met he would break eye contact again to conceal how he was feeling.

He was too vexed, as the dream from earlier in the morning was still fresh in his mind, amplifying his stiff attitude even more.

Then,

"– Ah, there you are. I finally found you darling~"

From the corridor extending from the magic practice field's main hall, came a grinning young girl.

Walking at a brisk pace, her golden dyed twin ponytails swayed back and forth. As she faced Harutora and the rest, a presumptuous expression emerged over her cute face.

She was Dairenji Suzuka, who entered the Omnyou Academy due to special circumstances. She did not participate in the self-training as she was on the sidelines overseeing their training exercises.

"You are still really useless, stupidly simple and crappy~"

Suzuka quickly uttered her usual string of malicious words, as she walked along side Harutora and the rest. "Naggy hag", replied Harutora with a bitter face.

"Either way, I certainly can't do it. After all, I'm just an ordinary student."

“Even so, isn’t there a limit to your stupidity? At this moment you are still a Omnyou Academy student.”

“If you put it that way, I’ve only just been promoted into the second year. Compared to my current ability, today’s practice was just way too difficult.”

“Pfft –. Invisibility magic is way too difficult? Cheer up a bit, senpai ~”

, snickered Suzuka, as she looked up at Harutora with a bored yet unexpectedly happy expression.

She was currently a first year student of the Omnyou Academy as punishment for her past transgressions. She was far from being an ordinary student, and infact, she is the youngest person to have passed the “First-Class Onmyou Exam”, becoming a National First-Class Onmyouji. Currently her qualifications have been suspended and her magic power has been significantly sealed. However despite this, she still had no trouble with using invisibility magic.

“In fact, I’ve never seen you use any shikigami or talisman magic eh.”

“Are you kidding? Shikigami and talismans aside, I still can’t do anything.”

“Ah, you’re lying right. Is this true?”

“Yeah, you don’t have to reply so seriously. Well it can’t be helped, and I’ve already tried working harder.”

Even though the other party was a first class magical practitioner, seeing her dumbfounded expression still made him feel devastated about himself. Moreover, Suzuka did not know that Harutora fared much better with practical skill applications. When it came to knowledge of magic theory, ever since he came to the academy, Harutora’s results had always been poor – not only that, recently his results on magic theory became even worse.

The fact that he was trying hard was real and even Harutora himself felt anxious. It is said that the Onymou Academy curriculum for the second years would begin on difficult topics. Before their promotion to third year, many students would

face setbacks and choose to drop out from the academy. For Harutora this was not something of irrelevance.

“Hey, Dairenji. I still can’t grasp the invisibility spell; do you have any personal tips that could help?” Touji, who had been silent the entire time, inquired after Suzuka. Suzuka instantly gave a bothered look, then shrugged her shoulders and gave her suggestion.

“ Tips…… Didn’t your class teacher mention it earlier? Eliminate your self-consciousness. The key is to keep your mind blank. You guys shouldn’t have a problem with that right?”

“Oh, wait a moment Suzuka. Wouldn’t this mean that you won’t be able to chant mantras?”

Harutora said hurriedly, to which Suzuka casually spat out a short reply. “You lack practice”

“To use any mantra, your body would need to memorize it first. If not, just practice it during your sleep and eventually it would work. Well, when I want to be invisible I don’t have to chant out the mantra one word at a time.”

Suzuka did not reveal any epiphanies, but spoke as though it was common sense. Harutora wrinkled his brow in shock, and Touji bore a long face. It should have been expected since there was a great difference in skill between Harutora and the rest compared to Suzuka. There was no point in even considering that difference.

- Well, but…

Putting the content of the discussion aside, Harutora was still grateful. Not for Suzuka’s knowledge, but because of her sincere answer to Touji’s question on his behalf.

It was during the late night secret meeting at the training camp last month that Suzuka revealed her true nature to Harutora and the rest and spoke without a false persona. Ever since then she slowly began to mingle and become part of the group, or at least that was how Harutora saw it.

-She’s matured…… Or rather it is in her nature to be straightforward, and a bit unforgiving.

Suzuka harsh remarks were still the same, and it was hard to predict if she would actually offer her help. However, she kept Natsume’s cross-dressing a secret and even lessened up on using that as leverage on Harutora and the rest. The latter was probably because she simply just got tired of doing it; however to not attack and make use of their weakness was enough for Harutora to be truly grateful.

“Why don’t you join us for practice? Even Spartan style training is fine with us.”

“Ha? Are you stupid? What would I gain from that?”

“You can gain our gratitude and respect.”

“That’s not a gain but a punishment game!”

“Che. That didn’t work. Then how about if I treat you to a burger.”

“No way! Are you trying to bribe one of the Twelve Heavenly General with a hamburger!”

“Don’t worry, I'll unwrap it for you first –”

“Go and die!”

Suzuka’s cheeks flushed red as her eyes narrowed and shouted in anger. Harutora just casually smiled as though nothing had happened. To be able to smile so nonchalantly, this action in itself was evidence of how the distance in their relationship had lessened.

Recently, Harutora had been having fewer conversations with Natsume and more with Suzuka. The earlier situation was the same; because of the doubt that Harutora had, he found it difficult to have a casual conversation with Natsume. Therefore he would chose to chat with Suzuka more.

When talking with Suzuka he did not need to think about anything, and to Harutora this was a time of pure bliss. But Harutora knew that this could not go on forever.

“So Suzuka, what do you think about Natsume’s invisibility spell? Is it up to your standard?”

Harutora deliberately diverted the topic to Natsume. If Touji or someone else was around, it made it easier to talk to Natsume.

However, this was wishful thinking on Harutora’s part, as casual conversation between Natsume and Suzuka is difficult.

Suzuka threw Natsume a glance and Natsume suddenly trembled.

“…… Nothing much, pretty good I guess? I would need to judge based on her opponent.”

“…… Ah, thank you.”

Natsume replied softly to Suzuka’s casual evaluation.

It was clearly written all over Natsume’s face that she was not able to deal with Suzuka. While Suzuka was not able to ignore her, she did not take Natsume seriously. Harutora had a bitter face and kept quiet.

While Suzuka gradually warmed up to Harutora and Touji, she had no sign of ever warming up to Natsume. Moreover, it probably was not just due to Suzuka as Natsume distanced herself in some sense.

Harutora originally wanted to help Suzuka understand Natsume. But currently he was unable to help himself and did not have the confidence in himself to help others.

Wait,

-But…… That’s it. If it was her…… If it was Hokuto, she should be able to get along with Suzuka rather quickly. If this person really was not Hokuto…..

Harutora subconsciously began comparing Natsume and Hokuto. He clearly knew that it was not the right time or place to be doing so, but he could not help it.

-Ah, yeah, wait a minute. Think about it clearly, was Hokuto that shy of strangers? How was she like when she first met Touji? The three of us were very close in the end…..

After snapping out of his deep thoughts, Harutora realized that the discussion had stopped again and the atmosphere had become increasingly heavy. Whenever this happened, he hoped that Touji would come in and lighten the mood, but this evil friend kept silent the whole time. He stayed out of the situation as long as he deemed that it did not require his intervention. Currently he was just turning his head, observing Harutora's conversation.

After the relationship between Harutora and Natsume had become uneasy, there was only one person that Harutora knew who could ease the mood.

"Sorry to keep everyone waiting! –Ah, isn't this Suzuka-chan? What do you think about my invisibility spell?" Harutora and company were gathered along the corridor in front of the boy's locker room. The girl's locker room door swung open and an academy student ran out.

She had chestnut-colored hair tied up in a 'Half-up' style, an outstanding figure, and a feisty attitude. Born into a Tsuchimikado branch family – this was the Kurahashi family eldest daughter, Kurahashi Kyouko.

When Kyouko saw Suzuka, her face immediately lit up with a bright smile. On the other hand, when Suzuka saw Kyouko, she just twitched her face.

The heavy atmosphere slowly receded.

"Noisy!"

A whisper – but it was loud enough that the other party heard it being spat out.

But this degree of malice would not cause Kyouko to waver.

“Eh, eh, how so? Although it wouldn’t be up to Natsume’s standards, I should be able to achieve a ‘good’ rating right?”

“God knows! How about you first make your breasts disappear, you big breasted woman!”

“Yeah --, to be honest, I’m not that good at invisibility spells. However, since our goal is to become professionals, we shouldn’t be using such wayward words.”

“Yeah, with that said …..!”

“However, Ohtomo-sensei is really powerful~ He really gave me a surprise. That kind of man used to be a Mystical Investigator. Invisibility magic should probably be his specialty.”

“…… You totally didn’t hear a word I just said.”

Suzuka grimaced as Kyouko continued talking regardless of her input. It seems that Suzuka inability to handle with Kyouko was greater than Natsume’s own inability to handle with her. Kyouko and Natsume were different, as Kyouko is well prepared on how to deal with Suzuka.

After the training camp, each member of Harutora’s group proactively tried to strike up conversations with Suzuka. This was so that they could build a relationship of trust with her. One reason was to obtain Suzuka’s assistance as one of the ‘Twelve Heavenly Generals’, the other was out of sympathy for her loneliness.

However, from Kyouko’s point of view, there was a moment of confusion where it felt as though the method and the result had been flipped around. After all, Suzuka, who was normally offensively aggressive, was now in a tired and evasive state. In that sense it felt very wrong.

“Shall we see Suzuka’s invisibility spell first hand? Actually I have confidence that I can see through it.”

“Ha? Don’t joke around. If I seriously went invisible, I could kick your ass and you wouldn’t even be aware of it –“

“Okay, so if I can see through your invisibility spell you have to tell us your three sizes.”

“I want to use a curse to end your life!”

“Really? Then let's do something more interesting to break that curse–-"

“This already has nothing to do with magic whatsoever!”

“B cup?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Are you really a daughter of the Kurahashi family?!”

To be honest, Harutora was a bit confused about whether the relationship between the two of them was good or bad.

...How did their relationship become like this.....

The male Harutora had trouble thinking about female relationships. But Suzuka's melancholy had already vanished because of Kyouko's actions. Harutora couldn't help but feel that things were moving in a pretty good direction. Well, although Suzuka herself was a bit troublesome.

After Kyouko teased Suzuka for a while, she turned to look at Natsume. "Ah, right, Natsume."

"You worked hard today too. Natsume-kun's stealth magic is really high-level, even Fujiwara-sensei praised you before."

"Y-Yeah, thanks."

"Suzuka-chan, you saw too, right? Natsume's stealth magic definitely isn't worse than any professional's, right?"

It wasn't as forced a question as Harutora's earlier one, but the reactions of the two were even more awkward than before.

"......Well. That's already the second time I've been asked the same question. I have no interest. I don't' care."

Suzuka suddenly lost interest and replied that. Kyouko looked at Harutora, mostly understanding the reasons after noticing the unsettled expression was on his face.

Kyouko, who had an abnormally powerful ability to deal with Suzuka, also had trouble with Suzuka and Natsume's relationship. No matter who provided assistance, the two of them wouldn't be able to interact smoothly with each other, in the end, the smiling expressions turned into bitter smiles.

Touji recognized the occasion, sweeping his gaze over everyone and changing the topic.

"Kyouko's here too, we should get going soon."

"EH? Wait, Touji. Tenma's still not here, right?"

"That guy seems to have business, so he left earlier."

Kyouko harrumphed upon hearing Touji's explanation and replied.

"Tenma's been like that a lot recently. I wanted to give him some encouragement after seeing him fail in the training before."

"I was also failing the whole time. It would be nice if you encouraged me too."

"You and Touji have strong spirits, so it's fine. Tenma seems to be really depressed."

"To think you're putting me and Harutora on the same level. What a surprise."

"Ah, sorry."

"Wait, Touji. Also, Kyouko, why are you apologizing!?"

Harutora glared at Touji and Kyouko, then continued speaking worried.

"But..... Tenma certainly is pretty down recently."

Outside of Harutora, Natsume, Touji, and Kyouko, their classmate Momoe Tenma had also participated in Harutora and the others' independent training. He had often come to watch like Suzuka, but after hearing Harutora and the others' stories since the training camp, he had spontaneously participated in the practical skills exercise.

Tenma's feelings made them very happy, but unfortunately, his hard work seemed mostly in vain. He hadn't been very good at practical skills in the first place, and he often slipped up in his training with Harutora and the others. Never mind Natsume and Kyouko, even Harutora and Touji had their strengths in a real battle. It seemed that among their group, he was the only one who felt fretful about his powerlessness.

"That guy's worrying over how to increase his practical skills ability. It seems that he has a lot of pressure from his family too."

"His family?"

"Ah, well, I heard that Tenma's succeeding a traditional Onmyoudou family. Also..... His family environment is a bit complicated."

Kyouko and Tenma had known each other for the longest among this group, and it seemed that she understood Tenma's familial situation very well. But based off how she smiled bitterly and minced her words, she wasn't going to delve any deeper.

"I see. .....Well, I don't think there's anything to worry about."

Actually, Tenma had been the most reliable when they had made curry during the training camp. Though Tenma wasn't good at practical skills, he might well just be oversensitive about his inadequacy. At the least, his grades in practical skills were slightly better than Harutora's.

...Well, there's a problem with feeling satisfied just by being stronger than me.

Harutora crossed his arms, nodding seriously.

"In that case, Kyouko, let's all go to karaoke later."

"Hah? Why did it turn into that? In the first place, Tenma's not here."

"When you're feeling down, the most effective thing to do is shout loudly, right? Send Tenma a message and tell him to meet up with us after finishing his business. How about that, Touji?"

"It's not bad once in a while."

Touji shrugged his shoulders after speaking in a light tone. Though Kyouko furrowed her brow, she didn't speak in opposition.

But,

"K-Karaoke!"

Instead, Suzuka's cheeks twitched. After Harutora noticed with a keen gaze, he let out a malicious laugh.

"What's wrong, Suzuka. Could it be that you've never gone to karaoke?"

"Ugh! S-So what! Anyway, I can't sing songs! I never even heard those things in the first place!"

"Ah. I'm really - hehe - looking forward to it."

"What's the deal with that strange laugh just now! I'm not going! I don't want to go at all!"

"I see. I wouldn't want to make you look bad with your tone deafness--"

"What the hell, Bandanna! In that case, I'll definitely make you worship my beautiful singing!"

Even Harutora would have trouble denying that he had doubts about whether the current situation could be called 'getting along'. In any case, it seemed that Touji was better at finding Suzuka's weak points than Harutora and Kyouko.

"Alright, it's decided." Harutora readily put his hand on Suzuka's head. Suzuka yelled out with a red face. It seemed a bit too red to be due to pure anger - at least to Kyouko and Touji.

Then,

"H-Harutora. I..... I'll wait for Tenma here and then go over with him."

Natsume said hesitantly.

Everyone went speechless momentarily. But this time, Touji didn't have any skillful interjection.

"Then I'll stay behind too. ...Harutora, Kyouko, you two go first with Dairenji. You'd better heat up the atmosphere."

Touji secretly glanced at Harutora. Considering the current relationship between the Tsuchimikados, Kyouko ought to take care of Suzuka and he ought to look after Natsume. Harutora was secretly grateful for this, and Kyouko immediately comprehended Touji's intent, saying goodbye in a cheerful tone.

"Better win, Suzuka-chan."

"I know already. I'm definitely going to kill you!"

Suzuka, who sharply proclaimed this, left driven by Kyouko's urging. Harutora also followed behind.

He looked over his shoulder, pretending to be normal:

"See you later..... Natsume, we'll be waiting for you."

"Yeah....."

In the end, they didn't meet each other's gaze. Harutora still felt a bit reluctant and still wanted to say something, but the words were stuck in his throat.

...Honestly.

Why were things so difficult. Harutora felt embarrassed, turning his head and putting his back to Natsume and Touji.

He had probably turned his back because he was conscious of Natsume's gaze that turned towards him.

Natsume kept staring at the backs of Harutora and the others until the three of them vanished around the corner of the hallway.

Not long afterwards, she sighed upsettedly. Touji cleared his throat next to her, feeling troubled.

"......Indeed, Harutora's been a bit strange recently, no doubt about it."

"...Eh?"

"Even so, you should look at yourself. If you have something to say, say it clearly. Why are you still being so cautious of Harutora?"

"Touji....."

Touji started at Natsume with a sharp gaze. Natsume also forgot that she was wearing her male disguise, murmuring with her 'original' voice.

"......I don't understand either. And Harutora's attitude right now..... What should I do..... I can't figure out my own thoughts....."

Natsume lowered her head, her tone clearly extremely downcast.

"......I might be hated....."

"If that's what you truly thing, then you're certainly a genuine idiot."

"But."

"But?"

Natsume unconscious looked up to search for support, weakly biting her lip after meeting Touji's gaze again. Touji played with the bandanna on his forehead to compose his own feelings.

"......Natsume. During the training camp last month, Harutora confessed that Hokuto was driving him. I don't know what you think of that, but you were undoubtedly that Hokuto that he's fascinated with, right?"

So please have some confidence in yourself - that was Touji's implied meaning. But Natsume still chewed her lip with no intention of replying.

Touji looked up at the ceiling, then revealed a powerless smile.

"......Well, it still won't be easy."

He had once said similar things to Harutora, and Harutora' reaction at the time had also been abnormally slow. It seemed that in his own way, Harutora was harboring complex troubles that Touji couldn't imagine. It would probably be counterproductive for an outsider to come out and help at this time.

As he complained, Touji still firmly believed in the bond between the two of them. Nothing could break the relationship between Harutora and Natsume, regardless of what discord ensued. Things would probably much easier if Touji's trust could at least be conveyed to one of the two.

"Let's go, Natsume. Even if we're going to wait for Tenma, we don't have to stand around here."

"......Yeah."

After seeing Natsume nod, Touji slowly walked out.

He wanted things to develop naturally, but it would be better for things to be resolved as early as possible. After that emotion, different from open-mindedness, surfaced in Touji's heart, he left the place with Natsume.

Part 4

"...Om marici sowaka... Om marici sowaka..."

He was on one knee, the fingers of his hands crossing in a complex pattern. They formed the Vajrapani mudra. He chanted the incantation, blessing his heart, forehead, left shoulder, right shoulder, and the top of his head, checking that the spell had formed while repeating the seven-syllable incantation.

"... Om marici sowaka... Om marici sowaka..."

A continuous stealth seal. He single-mindedly refined aura, gradually weaving the magic using magical energy.

This was stealth magic used in actual battles that they had learned today. Tenma had returned to the magic practice field, wanting to practice again alone.

"... Om marici sowaka... Om marici sowaka..."

Eliminate the self-consciousness, the two teachers had explained.

They wanted him to solve that difficult problem, but he couldn't form the magic. Maybe 'solving that difficult problem' entailed getting over distractions.

He didn't think about anything at all. His mind was blank, but it was hard to stop thinking about 'not thinking about anything at all' itself. Then, he would notice that he was still 'thinking about not thinking about anything at all', which would repeat ad infinitum.

He released himself from the chain reaction of thought, heading to a territory of no distractions.

But stealth magic was also a magic, a magic that concealed even the magic concealing his aura itself. Delicate adjustment was required - it had to be controlled. Could he simply eliminate his self-consciousness while maintaining that kind of control?

He didn't understand.

But he could only do it.

Stealth magic seemed to have its subtleties. No, it wasn't just stealth magic, all first-class magic had their own key tricks. In the end, the strengths of magic were greatly defined by the perception of the practitioner. Other field were mostly the same, but magic relied the most on the subject's talent. The closure of the world of magic symbolized that, and it was an indisputable truth that most practitioners through the ages had been born in families related to magic.

Nature and talent, bloodlines and genes. Hard work was naturally a pre-condition, but the people who were able to reach the 'top' were limited very early on. In the end, true practitioners were only those people who could reach the 'top'.

He could only do it.

But he was clueless.

What should he do? What was the key? Could he even do it?"

"... Om marici sowaka....."

As if suddenly becoming discouraged, Tenma released the hand seal.

He stopped chanting the incantation and then let out a heavy sigh. Propping his hands on his knees, Tenma slowly rose.

His body was incredibly heavy. Had he used too much aura, or was it because of his mood? Tenma had lost the will to continue training. He stood still, dejected.

Just then,

".....Yeah, what a pity."

Tenma rapidly turned his head in surprise upon hearing the chatting voice coming from behind his back. His homeroom teacher Ohtomo Jin leaned next to the entrance of the field, smiling as he watched Tenma.

"Sensei....."

"What's wrong, you don't need to be that shocked. I didn't use any stealth, I've been here the whole time. That proves how concentrated you were in your magic before."

Ohtomo said this, walking next to Tenma while holding a short cane.

He was a young yet haggard-faced man wearing a rumpled suit and old-fashioned glasses. A wooden fake leg could be glimpsed coming from his right pants leg. "You worked very hard." Ohtomo smiled at Tenma.

"You're really a hard-working person. But you worked a little too hard, you know? Haste makes waste."

Ohtomo advised him nonchalantly with a relaxed smile on his face like always. But the current Tenma was extremely moved by Ohtomo's gentleness.

".....Am I really too hasty?"

"Well. As far as I can see, I can't help but think that way - I guess."

"I see..... You saw through me really easily. My grandfather always scolds me when I show an expression unbecoming of a practitioner."

"Haha. He's very strict because he holds great expectations of you."

Ohtomo seemed as if he were encouraging him, but his smile vanished when he saw Tenma's expression afterwards. He carefully observed the boy's reaction.

Actually, the moment he said 'great expectations', Tenma's expression became rather gloomy.

".....Sensei. Is first-class magic..... Is Onmyoudou really an ability of geniuses? Is it really true that it's a quality that can't be made up for with any amount of hard work?"

Tenma looked up at Ohtomo, asking pleadingly. His cornered expression didn't fit Tenma's style.

Ohtomo looked at his student, nodding.

"Of course."

He asserted. At the same time as his homeroom teacher said that, Tenma's body suddenly went stiff.

"You ought to have thoroughly understood that kind of natural thing from class. After all, there definitely aren't many people in the world able to see spirits. Needless to say, only a small portion of those people are able to become professional practitioners. The world of magic is probably the only profession that's 'decided' from the very beginning."

Ohtomo's light tone was as if he were having a nice chat. But his tone, as unconcerned as usual, made Tenma feel battered by a storm.

"Sensei." After he came to his senses, Tenma interrupted Ohtomo's words as if unburdening himself of his grievances.

"I've already studied under Sensei for a very long time. I'm continuously studying first-class magic with Harutora and the others right now."

"......Yeah."

"Can I become a professional Onmyouji?"

Tenma watched Ohtomo motionlessly, his eyes showing a powerful will.

Ohtomo readily accepted his student's pressing question.

Then, he smiled softly.

"I don't know."

"Please explain!"

"Well, I really don't know. I know of your current power, but I can't predict your future. I'm not that kind of clairvoyant."

"But isn't an individual's ability already decided at birth?"

"Ability, yes. But, practitioners don't only need ability."

This was Tenma's first time strongly retorting to a teacher since he had entered the academy. But Ohtomo seemed not to mind, slowly explaining for him without mincing his words.

The cane in his hands made a soft noise.

"Well, Tenma-kun. Magic is unexpectedly deep. You could even say that it's an entire distinct world. Moreover, it's probably in a completely different direction from what you currently vaguely imagine."

"What does that mean?"

"Yeah. Anyway, there are many differences in the abilities required in Onmyoudou. To put it differently, any kind of ability that you possess can be used as a weapon. For example, like your parents."

Tenma's face suddenly twitched. Complex emotions flashed by the eyes of Ohtomo as he watched him.

But Ohtomo feigned ignorance and continued speaking.

"There's no denying it, your parents didn't have outstanding abilities as practitioners. Even so, those two left behind incalculable achievements. I always used the 'WA1' since I started Mystical Investigator work, and a friend of mine still treasures the motorcycle he rides that your parents made especially for him. They made huge contributions that surpassed their abilities, but does that meant they're not outstanding Onmyouji?"

"....."

Tenma lowered his head and fell silent. Ohtomo smiled wryly upon seeing his appearance.

"Come to think of it, it might have been a bit dirty to use your parents as examples. It might to be hard to retort when you're lectured with those examples."

".....That's not the case. Thank you."

Tenma replied, his head still lowered. Ohtomo watched Tenma with a sincere expression, walking next to him a short while later and putting his hand on his shoulder.

"......The Onmyou Academy only accepted you because we had faith in your talent. I hope that you could trust my judgment a little."

Tenma still didn't raise his head after hearing his homeroom teacher's encouragement.

But after a long silence, he finally nodded lightly.

☆

"......What's happened?"

The foggy windows were opened in the principal's office as they so rarely were. The cloud-filled sky could be seen outside from the opened windows. A wet-winged eagle was stopped by the windowsill.

The Onmyou Academy principal Kurahashi Miyo sat on the chair next to her desk, looking at the eagle by the window. She had taken off her reading glasses, and her expression was showing a look of rare shock.

"Truthfully?"

"It's probably easy to take as a joke. But at least I didn't want to be startled by the 'Kurahashi Diviner'."

The eagle said this as it faced the principal. Moreover, its expression and its small movements were mysteriously like a human's.

The eagle showed the age of its master through its lecturing tone. It was the voice of the Onmyou Agency Mystical Crime Investigation Department's Chief, Amami Daizen. This eagle was his shikigami.

Amami's shikigami seemed to be nonchalant, but the message it had conveyed was extremely serious. Actually, the information he had conveyed made one wonder whether to take it seriously.

"......An announcement of Ashiya Doman?"

"Yeah. Specifically, it's a 'letter of challenge'. Thanks to him, the Onmyou Agency's currently in an uproar."

As Amami said, a shikigami had appeared before the Onmyou Agency building two hours ago. The giant owl-shaped simple shikigami had stayed in front of the building, loudly proclaiming its message, and then the contents of the message had become a letter that dropped to the entrance of the building. After the Onmyou Agency inspected the message to see whether it had magic, they had immediately taken it in.

The contents were--

"'Ashiya Doman will come to take the 'Raven's Wing' tomorrow.' ...Honestly, there's been no news for the long time we've been investigating him, and suddenly there's this big movement. Thanks to him, the Mystical Investigators are thoroughly discredited."

Amami rattled off a complaint, but his voice sounded more excited instead. Since a long time ago, he had been the type to become more invigorated the stronger the opponent was. But this time, she couldn't just smile and observe Amami's bad taste.

"Is it really him?"

"It's a bit too much to be the prank of a fake. The 'Raven's Wing'... It's extremely realistic indeed for him to mention that tool in such an unlucky time. Even if it isn't 'D' himself, we can't just ignore this."

"......But why this, so suddenly."

"To be honest, I have no clue. It's really a shame as the Chief of the Mystical Investigators. But the Twin-Horned Syndicate hasn't made any visible motions since the Nue incident. This is just my instinct, but judging by their strategies before, those people won't take direct action on their own. But if this is just a single criminal, then I can't understand his reasoning."

"......How unreliable."

"You're too harsh. But I can't deny it."

Amami readily laughed back up hearing the principal's ice-cold assertion. The principal sighed unconsciously.

In the next moment, the joking attitude vanished from the eagle.

"...Ah, from now on this is just me talking to myself..... Tsuchimikado Yakou's relic, the 'Raven's Wing', is currently tightly sealed in an Onmyou Agency warehouse. Miyo-chan, you know that, right?"

"......Yes."

"Nnn. Of course you ought to know. After all, the Onmyou Agency once publicly announced that. 'D' ought to know this too, and 'according to normal logic', that guy's shikigami appearing in front of the Onmyou Agency building can be taken as evidence that he knows this. Most of the Onmyou Agency should believe that he's announcing that he wants to steal the Raven's Wing that's sealed in the building."

"....."

"But. There's some strange news circulating among a group of people regarding the 'Raven's Wing'. An extremely absurd rumor. It says that the 'Raven's Wing' kept at the Onmyou Agency isn't the original, but a fake. Miyo-chan, do you know about that news too?"

"......Well."

The principal's tone didn't change a bit as she replied carefully. But the expression she watched the eagle with suddenly sharpened like a drawn blade.

Amami's malicious laughter came from the eagle's beak again.

"Probably no one's sure whether that guy knows the news or not. But - as I mentioned before, his current objective is hard to pinpoint. In my position, I want to make complete preparations so that we won't get into trouble anywhere..... Well, that's hard to actually do. Miyo-chan, at the least you should get a firm grip on the situation."

"......Understood."

The principal said indifferently.

Then, her voice immediately became softer.

"......Amami-kun."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

The eagle didn't respond for a while.

The principal's figure was reflected in its avian eyes. After the silence, it spoke in a voice completely different from before,

"......Sorry. I'll do everything I can too."

After leaving those final words, Amami's presence vanished from the eagle.

The eagle's body shook, spreading its giant wings and flying into the overcast sky while paying attention to not splash any water around. The principal watched the eagle vanish in the shadow of one of Shibuya's buildings and rose to close the fogged-up window.

She sat back in her chair, closed her eyes, and regulated her breathing. What currently surfaced in her mind was the scene that had happened last month when she had sent her shikigami to the training camp like Amami had.

... 'I heard the original was in the Onmyou Academy.'

"....."

The principal opened her closed eyelids.

She picked up the phone on the table and rapidly dialed an internal phone call.

Then,

".....Hello, thanks for your work. It's Kurahashi. I'm very sorry, but please call Ohtomo-sensei and Fujiwara-sensei over. .....Yeah, that's right, it's an emergency."

Chapter 2 - Letter of Challenge

Part 1

Tenma walked out of the magic practice field, immediately seeing the message Harutora had sent.

It was an invitation to karaoke. Not only Harutora but also Natsume and Touji had waited especially for Tenma to return in the academy.

Even so, Tenma still used himself not feeling well as an excuse, walking alone on the road back home in the rain.

Tenma's family was in Gokokuji[2]. He had to change lines from Shibuya to Ikebukuro and Nagata-cho, but Tenma always rode until the center line and got off before Kishibojin, then walked back home. This area was mostly older residents, and the roads were narrow and meandering. Tenma liked walking in this kind of place.

Pots of petunias were placed in front of the store entrances and the stone walls were already faded. Snails crept slowly on the blooming hydrangea leaves along the roadside. Occasionally, a stray cat would appear that had been wet by the rain, passing warily in front of Tenma. Probably because of the rain, there weren't many pedestrians and the surroundings were calm and tranquil. All that could be heard were the sound of his umbrella and the pattering raindrops.

The Momoe house was the parent's home of Tenma's mother, a traditional family that had been related to Onmyoudou since the mid-Edo[3] period. Though they weren't very famous, they had worked as Onmyouji for generations and could be counted as a notable family. Tenma's mother was also a professional Onmyouji who had obtained qualifications from the Onmyou Agency.

But, Tenma's mother hadn't come back after meeting Tenma's father and choosing to run away from home, until she and her husband were killed in an accident. His father's parents were already deceased, so Tenma was taken in by the Momoe family and looked after by his grandparents.

To Tenma, who had lost his parents at a young age, the Momoe family's grandparents were nice but strict. On one hand, they had the style of a traditional family, and in addition, Tenma's mother who had betrayed the Momoe family and run away from home left complex emotions in the elders' hearts. Tenma knew that his own personality was sincere and he wasn't very self-assertive. He had been raised into this nature, and he was vaguely aware that his grandparents had probably had a large effect.

But Tenma didn't hate his grandparents. Rather, he loved them whole-heartedly.

No matter what his grandparents' feelings were, the two of them loved him greatly. Even if they had complex emotions, they didn't put up any pretense. When he had received strict education as a child, he would occasionally feel that they were 'distant' from him, but at his current age, Tenma felt more and more whole-heartedly that his grandparents were undoubtedly good people. They didn't hate Tenma's mother, they had just been deeply hurt and had never healed from it.

His elderly grandparents had only one wish, which was to raise Tenma into an excellent Onmyouji who could inherit the Momoe family. These two elders who were bad at lying had clearly transmitted that desire to Tenma. That was why Tenma could one-sidedly set becoming an Onmyouji as his target and diligently work hard.

But,

"......A professional, huh....."

The force of the rain hadn't increased, nor did it show any signs of stopping, just continuing indifferently.

The narrow road was empty, covered in puddles of rainwater. Surrounding him was a boundless, dark world, as if he were walking in a maze with no exit.

Tenma liked walking.

But, was it correct to keep walking when he couldn't see where he was going?

Ohtomo wanted him to have faith in the Onmyou Academy. But, an action like 'faith' actually meant isolating his consciousness. Even if he consciously had faith, he couldn't guarantee that he would be fully convinced. If his heart and his consciousness were contradictory, it would just end up exhausting both of them.

Anyway, he also understood.

Exactly how difficult becoming a professional was.

"....."

Tenma walked back home with low spirits in the rain.

The Momoe family's residence was a cottage surrounded by hedges, matching the family's history. It wasn't large, but it had its appeal.

When he walked near his home, Tenma noticed that there was an unfamiliar person in front of the entrance.

The young man wearing a black suit was standing there with an umbrella up. He smiled after noticing Tenma, then walked over.

With a voice like a clear, flowing brook:

"Could you be Momoe Tenma?"

"Yeah--"

"Sorry to bother. I'm Hirata Atsune. A Mystical Investigator."

Hirata spoke politely to the confused Tenma.

He maintained a gentle, sincere demeanor even to a student, more like a priest than an Onmyouji. His lock of red-dyed hair was the only thing about him that made a deep impression.

After Tenma listened to Hirata's greeting, his eyes widened in surprise.

"Mystical Investigator? Then, what do you need with me?'

"Ah, no. I haven't come to visit for an investigation. Actually, I wanted to deal with some business regarding old shikigami that the Mystical Investigators use - Well, it's just some formalities with documents."

Hirata's explanation was brief and serious. Upon hearing the phrase 'old shikigami', Tenma finally understood.

"Could it be, it's my mother's.....?'

"Ah, yes."

"In that case, I think it would be better to find the factory. Our family....."

"It seems so. Your grandfather said the same things just now."

Hirata showed a steady smile as he explained.

It seemed that he hadn't just come to visit, but he had come out after already talking about his business.

But, his posture as he stood in the rain looked as if he were waiting for something..... That was probably a mistaken feeling.

".....If you chose to come to our family to ask, that old shikigami wasn't mass-produced, but rather an original creation of my mother, right?"

"Uh, it seems to be an experimental product. I analyzed it a little bit - it's simple, but it really has its own style."

Hirata's remark might just be polite rhetoric, but it touched upon Tenma's wounds again.

Just like what Ohtomo had said in the magic practice field, everyone knowledgeable in this world had heard of the famous name of Tenma's parents. The two of them were the founding members of the 'Witchcraft Corporation', a factory that made unique magical tools. His mother was the chief designer and his father was the primary engineer.

The Witchcraft Corporation didn't have a long history, but it was the first private enterprise that had broken the Onmyou Agency's status as a monopoly and divided up the magic market. Its largest figures were undoubtedly Tenma's deceased parents. In particular, his mother had invented many manmade shikigami which were still the primary product of the business and which had obtained the support of many Onmyouji. Among them, the most famous was the binding shikigami 'WA1 Swallow Whip' that the Mystical Investigators used when they captured criminals. This manmade shikigami had already become a synonym for binding shikigami, and actually, the current commonly-used types of binding shikigami and transport shikigami were shikigami created with the namesake methods of Tenma's mother.

Before the Witchcraft Corporation had been founded, shikigami strengths were directly connected to the strength of the practitioner. But after the 'enhanced usability' shikigami that were created 'enhanced for specific purposes' took the

stage, shikigami strengths became standardized. This type of shikigami 'whose strength was unrelated to the person and that could wield a specific power' became mainstream for manmade shikigami in the future. The manmade shikigami that the Onmyou Agency created now - both general-use shikigami and defensive shikigami - also followed such guidelines. In that sense, Tenma's mother could be said to have changed the shikigami usage methods of modern Onmyoudou.

But on the other hand, the action of 'selling magic' produced a completely different emotion in the grandparents of the Momoe family, which had passed down Onmyoudou since ancient times. They had always complained that manmade shikigami that were 'easy to use' and 'for the masses' would lead to the overall level of Onmyouji shikigami usage to decline. To the Momoe family, which had passed down Onmyoudou for many years, this was a shame to their ancestors.

The Witchcraft Corporation was the most important reason his mother and grandparents had never gotten along.

"...Tenma-san, did you just come back from the Onmyou Academy?'

"Nn, yeah....."

"I see. How tiring, to come back this late."

"Ah, it's not much."

Tenma's expression became gloomy again. Hirata smiled slightly, looking at Tenma.

".....I'll stop talking and take my leave. I'm extremely sorry for calling you out in the rain."

"Ah, I should be the one to apologize. I was unable to help."

Tenma also lowered his head in a fluster upon seeing Hirata bow to him again.

In the moment Tenma moved his gaze, Hirata's left hand that didn't hold the umbrella moved sharply yet smoothly.

An instantaneous motion.

The two of them raised their heads and their gazes met. Hirata walked away with a smile as if nothing had happened. Tenma inadvertently watched the direction Hirata left in.

"......Huh?"

He just noticed.

"Why did that person know my name?"

It was hard to imagine that his grandparents had especially told him. Tenma racked his brains but couldn't figure it out, walking through his house's entrance.

The force of the rain hadn't increased, nor did it show any signs of stopping, just continuing indifferently.

After returning home, Tenma hung his rain-soaked uniform in his own room, but he didn't notice the small slip of paper in the pocket.

Part 2

The center of the Japanese magic community - the Onmyou Agency towered in an area near Akihabara. Several strong auras swirled together in the first meeting room of the office building.

It was already deep into the night. An emergency meeting was currently being held here according to Chief Kurahashi's orders. The main topic was the letter that had been sent to the office not long ago. The problem 'D' had brought up was even more severe than what the Mystical Investigators had predicted - As for what it was, 'D' had notified them that he was going to steal the 'Raven's Wing'. They were currently holding a meeting to discuss countermeasures.

Everyone gathered in the meeting room was a member who could represent the Onmyou Agency.

First was the one who had overseen this case the longest, the chief of the Mystical Investigators, Amami Daizen.

A managing exorcist officer, supervisor of the Exorcist Bureau, and Independent Exorcist, Miyachi Iwao.

The Exorcist Bureau Intelligence Chief Watanabe Kenichi. The chief of the Intelligence Bureau, the Special Senser Miyoshi Tougo. Other than Watanabe, those four were all National First-Class Onmyouji - commonly known as Divine Generals.

Moreover, these weren't the only ones of the Twelve Divine Generals gathered in the meeting room.

The Independent Exorcist Kogure Zenjirou, Yuge Mari, and Kagami Reiji. This was the first time after the 'Hinamatsuri Repurification' spiritual disaster terrorist attack that had happened this March that four of the five current Independent Exorcists had gathered together. The fact that such situations kept popping up continuously could probably be called an abnormal situation of its own.

There were also members with important positions in the Exorcist Bureau and Mystical Investigators in attendance. Even the chief of the General Affairs Department was present because he understood the construction of the building the best. Of course, the chief of the Mystical Investigator Public Safety Division and Hirata Atsune could also be seen, since Hirata was responsible for the Twin-Horned Syndicate business and had a very deep connection with the 'D' file. Hirata was the only one in the meeting room without a position.

Not even anything involving the 'D' file had made the Onmyou Agency take such a large-scale action until now. It was natural that they hadn't reacted like this before. Never mind the Twin-Horned Syndicate - the organization that incited practically all the big events - for now, the 'D' file had just looked like one of the subsidiary branches left behind by the Twin-Horned Syndicate. In the end, even

the name 'D' was a tag name used inside the Mystical Investigators. Hence, even if the Mystical Investigators viewed 'D' as an extremely dangerous person and had hunted him down with unusual strength, it wasn't at the level where they would muster the strength of all the departments to consider countermeasures.

After all, 'D' was a practitioner who went by the name Ashiya Doman. In the end, there were still too many mysteries to take him as a real threat. Hence, the existence of the mysterious practitioner 'D' only received the Onmyou Agency's attention because he was connected with the Twin-Horned Syndicate.

The reason the Onmyou Agency's original attitude had changed was because Independent Exorcists had come in contact with 'D' during the 'Hinamatsuri Repurification' in March and confirmed that he was an actual threat. After that, the Onmyou Agency recognized 'D' as a dangerous element of the same level as the Twin-Horned Syndicate. This commotion had happened as strategies centered on the Mystical Investigators were being developed to deal with him.

Moreover, this was no small action of 'D' in some arbitrary area, but a notification of a bold, fearless, head-on crime sent to the Onmyou Agency. At this point, this file had already become an important problem related to the overall credibility of the Onmyou Agency.

"What's important is that it's a problem of reputation."

Amami's announcement probably voiced the opinion of the higher-ups.

'D' had written the place and time in the letter bringing up the problem, even including his goal. The Onmyou Agency had to compress their huge normal business - especially dealing with the additional spiritual disasters from March - to their smallest limits to be able to plan strategy against 'D'. Even if 'D' was the Onmyouji Ashiya Doman himself, they definitely couldn't lose.

"I had a lot of things to ask that man anyway. Also, he purposefully came up to us to make a disturbance. So we definitely need to catch him."

Amami, the person in charge, held the bold and fearless declaration in his hand as he faced the people gathered in the meeting room. Some people nodded their

heads ambitiously, some people received the message calmly, and a fearless morale towards the approaching enemy burned in others.

Something everyone here possessed was a definite self-confidence and a definite trust in their own camp. Most of them were all incredibly strong, and the Onmyou Agency was a group of organized practitioners. No matter how strong the Onmyouji, they definitely had no reason to fear him if he was only a single enemy.

Amami quickly began explaining the operational deployment for the attack against 'D'. He was older than the Onmyou Agency Chief Kurahashi Genji, and could be called the 'dean' of the Onmyou Agency. He had smoothly resolved things even though adjustments had to be made between divisions. He occasionally also adopted the opinions of others, but he had instantly decided the main points of the operation.

In the dead of night, the meeting still progressed smoothly and fervently.

Only two people weren't influenced by the atmosphere.

One was Kagami Reiji, with the nickname 'Ogre Eater'. He was young and had a strong spirit of resistance, always sitting on the sidelines for the meeting. He held interest towards 'D' himself, but he felt that the content of the meeting would be meaningless and took it as nothing more than the useless talk. Perhaps he had even considered whether he could come in contact with 'D' alone before the people around him. Miyachi was his direct superior and had glanced at his subordinates several times, seeming to want to check on their attitudes.

Surprisingly, Kogure Zenjirou was the other person who hadn't been drawn in by the enthusiasm around him.

Kogure was different from Kagami. He listened carefully to the contents of the meeting. But, his face was always shadowed by concern that was usually unlike him.

Kogure was undoubtedly an excellent exorcist, but his position in the organization was still very low. In a VIP-filled time like this, it would be hard for

him to influence the progress of the meeting unless the leadership asked the opinions of everyone.

Kogure's expression seemed as if he had something he wanted to say as he watched the activity of the meeting.

But, in the end there was no opportunity for him to speak.

☆

The time was already past midnight when the operational meeting ended.

"...Miyachi-san!"

After the meeting ended, the meeting attendees prepared to return to their own divisions. Among them, Kogure called out to his boss Miyachi who walked in front of him in the office corridor.

"Kogure? What is it?"

Miyachi stopped walking, turning around. Kogure jogged up to his side.

Miyachi was the supervisor of the Exorcist Bureau as well as an elite Independent Exorcist - a National First-Class Onmyouji. Because Miyachi was currently in a commanding position, Kogure rarely had the opportunity to call him by his nickname, the 'Enma' Miyachi. He was someone strong enough to make even battle-hardened veteran exorcists tremble, and was still feared by many. During the March operation against the Nue, his achievement had been piercing one of the giant 'Type-Chimera's wings in the outer garden of Meiji Shrine.

It was hard to associate Miyachi's external appearance with his heroic combat history. He had a bitter expression, was very cordial to people, and was middle-aged and of a small stature. He had a clear-cut face and was very expressive, like an actor on stage - especially like a seasoned comedian, leaving a funny and

fashionable impression on others. A beard grew around his mouth and chin, and the rumor that this was the source of his name 'Enma' had even spread among the cadres[4].

But, Kogure knew Miyachi's power well.

He stretched in front of Miyachi:

"Sorry. Actually, I want to talk - no, I have something to report."

Miyachi showed a wry smile upon hearing Kogure's bland tone, rolling the file in his hand into a rod and tapping his neck with a thump.

"What is it, to make you this anxious. You can't wait until we get back to headquarters?"

"I'd like to report here, if possible."

Kogure's expression was extremely serious. Miyachi cast him a probing expression, but immediately urged him on with a "Go ahead".

"It's regarding the 'Raven's Wing'."

"The 'Raven's Wing', what about it?"

"Well..... The one sealed in the Onmyou Agency storehouse is a replica... I heard that kind of rumor."

"What?"

Miyachi suddenly raised an eyebrow.

After staring at Kogure for a while, he pretended to look around randomly. Kogure lowered his voice as much as possible, but it was too dangerous to discuss such a topic while standing in the corridor.

His gaze returned to Kogure again:

"......What's going on? That's my first time hearing so."

"You too, Supervisor?"

"Of course. Where did the information come from?"

"Well..... An old acquaintance."

"Your acquaintance? Then, Ohtomo?"

"No. I don't know whether you know the person..... Saotome Ryou."

"Saotome? I haven't heard that name. What division?"

"......The Imperial Household Agency."

Miyachi's expression changed again. A dim light shone from the eyes that looked at Kogure and slowly sharpened.

"The Lingering Spirit Division..... Could that person have not ended up the same way?"

"Yes. That person left early on. So there should be no relation with the Twin-Horned Syndicate."

"A researcher?"

"Yes. Specializing in Tsuchimikado Yakou."

Miyachi nodded his head knowingly after hearing Kogure's reply.

"I see. Then there might be an association with the Raven's Wing. So that's the person who claimed to you that the Raven's Wing here is a replica."

After Miyachi spoke up to confirm, Kogure nodded his head sincerely with a 'Yes'.

Haha, Miyachi laughed while stroking his beard. Kogure hadn't mentioned this issue in the meeting because he didn't want to make the information publicly available. Miyachi inadvertently noticed his circumstances.

Kogure continued speaking.

"Moreover, that person's words were very descriptive. The Raven's Wing sealed in the Agency is fake, and the genuine is in the Onmyou Academy--"

"The Onmyou Academy? Hey hey, that's too....."

Miyachi smiled wryly. Incidentally, the 'Agency' was mostly terminology used by members of the Exorcist Bureau, referring to the Onmyou Agency and its office.

"Yeah. I thought it was a joke the first time I heard it, but after thinking carefully, I felt that it might not be impossible. The Onmyou Academy principal was the past head of the Kurahashi family. She met with Yakou during his lifetime."

"Yakou died the year the war ended. At the time, the past Kurahashi family head was..... what, how old? For now say she was a child about ten years old. ...Ah, well, I indeed heard Chief Amami say that the previous head was extremely active as a miko since she was a child..... Even so, she couldn't possibly have been given the Raven's Wing."

"It might not have been through direct means, the Kurahashi family also belonged to the resurrected Onmyou Bureau during wartime. Kurahashi family members worked together with Yakou in the Onmyou Bureau during wartime, and after Yakou died, the half-shut down Onmyou Bureau was built into the current Onmyou Agency."

".....I see. It's indeed not impossible. But even so, the Kurahashi family's previous head didn't have any reason to hide the Raven's Wing in the chaos after the war, right? Much less to deliberately create a replica."

"That..... I still can't understand at all....."

Kogure, who couldn't answer his boss's question, mumbled vaguely. Miyachi sighed lightly, raising his head to look at Kogure and tapping his shoulder with the rolled-up file.

"......A researcher specializing in Tsuchimikado Yakou, huh....."

His mouth forming a '﹀', Miyachi thought for a moment while rubbing the beard on his chin with his finger.

But,

"Well, whatever. In any case, the opponent couldn't possible know such rare information. The location in the notice was also the Agency. There's no need to be concerned."

He made such a conclusion.

A conclusion that could be predicted. But, Kogure didn't feel at ease because of it.

"Supervisor. It was an official of the Lingering Spirit Division who told me that."

"Yeah, so?"

"Later on, the Lingering Spirit Division became the breeding ground for the Twin-Horned Syndicate. Of course, there were definitely quite a few people who saw Saotome's research results, and maybe there are people among them who noticed the matter pertaining to the Raven's Wing."

"......So?"

"Ashiya Doman - 'D' - has contacted the Twin-Horned Syndicate. That person knows about this matter, and the probability that he believes it is definitely not zero."

Kogure explained, leaning his body forward towards Miyachi.

"Please. Please speak to Chief Amami. We have to consider the possibility that 'D' will appear at the Onmyou Academy as well as the Onmyou Agency office."

Ordinarily, 'D' would attack the offices of the Onmyou Agency. The possibility of such a situation was extremely high. It was undoubtable that they should make preparations for an attack centered on the office for such circumstances.

But, if the probability of the other situation wasn't zero, they should divide off a minimum number of people to go to the Onmyou Academy. The Onmyou Academy building had defensive magical enchantments that could be called the best in Tokyo, but it wasn't enough - they couldn't expose such a group of underage people to danger. It would be the biggest disgrace to the Onmyou Agency if they were sacrificed instead.

But, Miyachi's reply wasn't as Kogure had expected.

"...Kogure. Amami-san probably knows about these circumstances."

Kogure couldn't help but doubt his own ears, unconsciously letting out a "Huh?" sound.

An empty smile emerged on Miyachi's lips.

"Of course, he definitely knows more detail than you do. That's the kind of person the Chief of the Intelligence Division is, he has those duties. He crafted this operation while knowing about those circumstances."

At the same time as he explained seriously, Miyachi's gaze left Kogure, looking into the distance. "Perhaps....."

"Perhaps he confirmed over at the Onmyou Academy. After all, Amami-san and the previous Kurahashi head were on good terms."

Yes. Amami and Principal Kurahashi were very close to one another. Ohtomo had once griped that he had been ordered here and there by the two of them during the spiritual disaster attack in March.

"Then what do we do? Honestly, even if we don't know 'D's true fighting power, fighting power of the operations members is more than enough."

"Hey, hey. It was none other than you who saw 'D' first-hand and reported that we needed to be on guard."

"Though that's true, with Supervisor and Chief Amami, our fighting power is already higher than when we faced the Nue, right? Of course, that doesn't mean we don't have to be careful, but it wouldn't be a problem if we just left the same fighting power from last time to guard the Agency and split up our fighting power to defend the Onmyou Academy, right?'

Kogure, who couldn't agree, made his proposition with great vigor. Miyachi's body was short and Kogure was of tall stature, so Kogure almost covered Miyachi when he leaned forward eagerly.

On the other hand, Miyachi inadvertently revealed a wry smile at Kogure's air of arrogance.

The expression Miyachi looked at Kogure with was mixed with equal amounts of trust and 'this youngster is too inexperienced'.

Then,

"...The Kurahashi family's previous head hasn't admitted it to be true. Naturally. If what you say is true, then she's culpable of hiding the Raven's Wing."

Miyachi's analysis made Kogure speechless.

Miyachi pulled back his neck, continuing to speak as if he were debunking the tricks of a magician.

"If the Kurahashi family's previous head requested that the Agency protect the Onmyou Academy, it would be equivalent to admitting the truth about hiding the Raven's Wing. Of course, the Agency would request that she hand over the genuine Raven's Wing, and with that she couldn't possibly refuse. In other words, the Kurahashi family's previous head considered that the Onmyou Academy would suffer the threat of 'D', but even with that considered, didn't want to hand over the Raven's Wing."

Probably as expected of his boss, Miyachi's observation was even deeper and more cunning than Kogure's. Kogure let out a moan after Miyachi pointed out his negligence.

"But..... Why? Chief Kurahashi is Principal Kurahashi's son, right? Isn't he one of her own?"

The Onmyou Academy principal and the Onmyou Agency chief were both from the Kurahashi family. Right now, the Kurahashi family was a great family that had a grasp on the magic community, and there was no place that the Kurahashi family couldn't reach if they tried. Considering this - no matter what kind of mystery was in the Raven's Wing - there should be no difference between protection from the Onmyou Academy and protection from the Onmyou Agency. Moreover, protection from the Onmyou Agency would be safer.

Kogure shook his head without a clue.

Then,

".....One of her own. Indeed, that's true."

Miyachi's expression suddenly sharpened. He stared with an eye-catching intensity at the confused Kogure:

"What's wrong, Kogure, you're too lax. Have you already forgotten the incident last summer?"

This time, Kogure was truly speechless.

He finally understood. The 'incident last summer' that Miyachi spoke of was a certain incident that had happened in the Onmyou Academy. Simply put, a certain Mystical Investigator had been identified as a member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate.

At the time, the Mystical Investigators had completely cleared up the problematic Mystical Investigator and any further relationship, but they were unable to trace his connections back to the Twin-Horned Syndicate and ended up with nothing in

the end. But on the other hand, that incident had revealed a truth that had been predicted long ago to the light of day.

In other words, the Twin-Horned Syndicate still existed, and a small number of its members had mixed into the Onmyou Agency.

".....Amami-san hasn't taken a tough attitude towards the Onmyou Academy probably because of similar reasons. If he took the Raven's Wing back to the Agency, instead of being taken by 'D', we would be giving it straight to the Twin-Horned Syndicate's hands. Even so, considering the safety of the students, he probably should take some countermeasures..... But judging by the current situation, the probability that 'D' attacks the Onmyou Academy is very low this time. In this situation, it's most appropriate to face it calmly. Well, the final judgment will become very tricky."

"....."

After hearing Miyachi's explanation, Kogure couldn't continue making his proposal. He was a bit downcast, seeming to have experienced his own powerlessness, and tightly clenched his fist.

Miyachi looked unblinkingly at his subordinate, the expression on his face hard to ascertain.

Then, he knocked Kogure's head with the rolled-up file resting on his shoulder.

"Anyways, Kogure, you have to focus and perform the task assigned to you - I'd be able to relax a bit if you could settle the living situation."

Smiling as he spoke, Miyachi left behind Kogure and walked away again. Kogure didn't call out to him again, silently watching the back of his boss as he left.

Miyachi's keen calculations constantly repeated themselves in Kogure's heart.

The judgments Amami and Principal Kurahashi had made were probably based on the increased defensive power of the Onmyou Academy beforehand.

Thinking again, this was clearly an operation that would involve fighting against 'D' face-to-face, but even if they couldn't make this public, it was indeed a bit unnatural to not have called 'him' over. After all, 'he' had once come in close contact with 'D', and he was the only one to still live after being wounded.

Though it hadn't been made public, Amami and Principal Kurahashi couldn't possibly be oblivious.

In case 'D' attacked the Onmyou Academy, there was still someone in the academy who could oppose him.

Even if victory was difficult, at the least that teacher could act as a shield for the students.

"......Really, I have some sort of bad premonition....."

Kogure muttered listlessly, clenching his teeth.

It was one at night. The 'tomorrow' that 'D' indicated had already arrived.

Part 3

The rain finally stopped, but the morning was still dim. It was windy, and the restless sky seemed as if it might start pouring again at any time.

Harutora, who had left the dorm in the morning to walk to the academy building, was alone, which was extremely rare. Natsume had left the dorm first without eating, claiming to have no appetite, and Touji had been the opposite - it was a rare morning where he had woken up late. In the end, Harutora had to walk to the academy alone.

The warm wind carried the smell of the sea. It was fortunate that he didn't have to use an umbrella, but the weather wasn't good enough for him to enjoy the time after the rain.

But Harutora felt unexpectedly pained when he thought that it was more relaxing to be alone than with company. Right now, the people around him already had more problems than he could handle.

"......Yesterday's karaoke ended pretty badly....."

He had originally proposed karaoke to cheer up Tenma, but it was actually also a strategy Harutora had thought up to mend his relationship with Natsume. Naturally, wanting to cheer up Tenma and give him spirit wasn't a sham, but at the same time, if everyone could happily have fun together, he could probably return naturally to his former relationship with Natsume. If he could talk with Natsume like before, he could just pretend that nothing had happened and continue acting. With that, they would be able to completely revert to the atmosphere in the past - Originally, that was what Harutora had planned.

But, the important Tenma hadn't participated since he wasn't feeling well. The late-arriving Natsume and Touji had been depressed, with no intention at all of singing. Suzuka seemed extremely happy, but had gradually lost interest after the two of them showed up. In the end, it had become a two-person party between Harutora and Kyouko. It was all because of that dilemma that his throat still hurt today morning.

...Give me a break. How long is this situation going to go on for.....

Harutora didn't attribute all the problems to himself.

But, one of the reasons Harutora and the others weren't getting along right now undoubtedly came from himself. Because Harutora suspected that Natsume might be Hokuto's practitioner.

...Really..... What exactly is going on?

Hokuto was a simple shikigami controlled directly by the practitioner. The practitioner's words and feelings would become Hokuto's unaltered words and feelings.

Even if there were some differences and if the practitioner was acting, Hokuto could essentially be counted as a body double of the practitioner. No, she wasn't just a body double, she was basically the practitioner after changing clothes. The 'person inside the clothes' was the same.

So Harutora had never even dreamed that 'that' Hokuto's practitioner could be 'that' Natsume.

...After all, Natsume.....

Harutora had known from a very small age that he didn't have the spirit-seeing ability, but he had only begun to realize around the time he entered middle school that his childhood dream of becoming an Onmyouji was actually not his fate. After growing up, he had already woken up from his childhood dreams for the future and begun directly facing his own real future.

At around that time, he had slowly grown alienated from Natsume, who had been very intimate with him.

After all, Natsume was taking great strides towards her future of becoming an Onmyouji, and had already decided before entering middle school that she would test into the Onmyou Academy after graduating from middle school and end up becoming a professional Onmyouji. Harutora didn't see any other choice for Natsume - he didn't even dare imagine any.

This girl walked towards a different path from him and would definitely enter another world. The Harutora from back then was confused over how to face that kind of childhood friend. So, he had naturally left Natsume's side with the self-righteous beliefs that Natsume thought the same as he did.

Of course, Harutora's beliefs had been mistaken. Natsume had still one-sidedly believed that 'Harutora would become her shikigami' after the distance between the two of them gradually widened.

Harutora only understood when he was in his third year of middle school. At the time, he told Natsume that he was going to enter an ordinary high school.

Harutora had hurt Natsume - the worlds of the two of them were decisively separated just like that. Even Harutora believed so at the time.

...Then.....

At the time, Natsume had slowly changed. She became more feminine, sedate, and looked mature.

Every time he met her, he felt that she had become prettier.....

Comparing her with himself, who had always been a stupid brat, produced an insurmountable gap.

On the other hand, Harutora met Hokuto on a summer day in his first year of middle school. That nostalgic and never-fading 'summer race' happened just as Harutora planned on moving towards a new path.

Hokuto was a 'new friend' to Harutora. As a member of the Tsuchimikado family and as someone who had dreamed of becoming an Onmyouji since childhood, and as a young man who had begun moving towards a new, more realistic future - he made a friend. This encounter symbolized a new era, a new life, and a brand-new self.

He had wanted to walk towards a realistic, definite world, and Hokuto was the first friend he met along the way.

Natsume, Hokuto.

Harutora couldn't think of these two people, who symbolized completely different meanings, as the same person.

Such a possibility was hard to imagine.

But,

...That ribbon.....

"....."

Harutora walked along the road with a bitter expression.

If Hokuto was Natsume's shikigami, why had Natsume done such a thing?

It was a waste of effort no matter how he thought about her reasons.

It might be to watch over the boy who would one day become her shikigami, or it might just have been a silly distraction from the start but later gradually became hard to pull away from. In addition, she couldn't truly interact with Harutora who had already become distant - that was probably also a reason. There were many possibilities.

But, regarding how rational the reasons were, only Natsume knew the answer. From there on, further speculation was not possible.

...Think about other related areas.

It was plain to see that Hokuto and Natsume's personalities just happened to be opposites.

Hokuto was direct, cheerful, childlike, random, expressed her emotions honestly, and her happiness and anger were stronger than normal. She spoke with a tone like a boy, and Harutora had always teased her for being a 'tomboy'.

In comparison, Natsume was quiet, mature, sedate, and already had a firm grasp on 'herself' when she entered middle school. Thinking carefully, she was a bit cold in some sense, and sometimes she even pull back into her shell. Frankly, Harutora had frequently felt that she was hard to approach.

They were completely different after more careful thinking.

But, Harutora's impressions of Natsume were all from before he had come to Tokyo. More accurately, they were his 'preconceptions' of her when he had a distant relationship with Natsume - Harutora had only realized this recently.

After going to the Onmyou Academy together and living in neighboring rooms of the same dorm, his impression of Natsume had suddenly changed. Even if he

described this in the most conservative manner, he could still say that his image of her had collapsed.

After all, Natsume got mad often, and laughed unexpectedly innocently. Her excellent grades hadn't changed, but she often slipped up, and she was a bit timid at important times.

Ignorant of the world, acted tough, she always behaved normally, but actually didn't have confidence in herself.

Harutora had finally understood after walking the same road.

Natsume was the genius who would become the next head of the Tsuchimikado.

Also, she was a normal girl.

...Yeah, well, maybe not 'normal', as after all various things had happened.....

Among them, Harutora felt the most surprised that Natsume was hiding the 'naivety' in her heart, or her childishness. Before this, Harutora had always felt that Natsume had already become an 'adult'. An indifferent figure with the goal of being the main family's next head - also, an attitude of looking coldly upon things useless to this cause - such impressions were deeply implanted into Harutora's mind. They were probably also 'preconceptions'.

Such 'preconceptions' weren't mistaken themselves, but Natsume wasn't as simple as Harutora thought. They were only one side to her.

...Come to think of it, the first time I spoke to the 'guy' Natsume after entering the Onmyou Academy, I felt that 'this person is a bit tense today somehow'.

At the time, he had immediately thrown that matter away with indifference. After all, Natsume's complete change of personality was basically only at the time when she pretended to be a male. He had taken that personality change to be a sort of act by Natsume and hadn't dug any deeper.

It was different now. Now, Harutora already understood that 'Natsume when she was pretending to be a male' was also 'Natsume'. Needless to say, when she pretended to be a male, it was more common for her to show the 'her' that usually wasn't expressed.

If it were the Natsume from those times...

If it were the Natsume pretending to be a male... Overlap wasn't impossible with the image of Hokuto that Harutora was extremely familiar with.

...Ah, idiot.

He himself also felt anxious. Better to go ask clearly and be able to relax a bit.

Actually, Harutora had planned on speaking up and asking several times. He would take the suspicion in his heart and ask Natsume clearly.

But.

But.....

... 'Who would be happy watching the person they like kissing someone else! Do you know how painful, how lonely, how difficult that feeling is!'

"....."

He couldn't ask.

For whatever reason, he couldn't ask her directly.

It would be fine if she denied it. That wouldn't produce any change in their relationship thus far. Maybe it could even restore their original status.

But--

What if she gave an affirmative reply? If his suspicions were indeed true..... An action like confirming with Natsume would destroy their previous relationship. Completely.

Harutora feared that situation.

Destroying his ordinary life until now.

He had always greatly cherished his ordinary life with Hokuto and Touji until last summer, constantly turning his back to the world of Onmyouji and his identity as a Tsuchimikado family member.

The current Harutora feared that his previous relationship with Natsume would be destroyed.

.....I'm still running away.

First, even if he asked the question directly, he wasn't sure Natsume would tell the truth.

If it wasn't true, she would definitely make that clear.

But what if it was true? If Hokuto truly was Natsume's shikigami, would Natsume end up saying her thoughts? After all, if Natsume happened to be Hokuto, then the confession back then had actually come from Natsume's mouth.

That Natsume.

To Harutora.

"....."

Harutora unconsciously covered his hot face with his hand.

...Natsume? To me? No, but..... could it be..... how is that possible.....

If, just if, on the off chance, if Natsume answers my suspicions.....

...What would become of things..... Eh? In other words, that's equivalent to Natsume admitting the confession? I, In that case..... Eh? Eh!

Harutora couldn't think calmly about what would come next. Honestly, that was the main reason Harutora couldn't speak normally to Natsume.

...'Especially Natsume-kun. It's like the shikigami is a part of him.'

...'Only Natsume-kun would be able to do such a thing, right?'

The words that Tenma and Kyouko had said during the camp supported Harutora's suspicions at an excellent time.

It was possible.

It could be.

The possibility and various imaginations mixed together in Harutora's heart.

...'I'll kiss you.'

...'Harutora, I like you.'

Harutora's cheeks became redder and redder as his head spun.

Really.....

Was it really like that?

Was such a thing possible?

"Ah, idiot!"

Heat flowed from his body in his confusion. His originally ambiguous feelings were amplified infinitely.

There was no one he could talk to about this kind of situation. Touji had recently been suspicious of him as well. He could do nothing about it. If he could have thought of something he would have done it long ago.

What exactly could he do? What should he do? Harutora thought bitterly while holding his head.

Just then,

"H-H-Harutora-sama? Are you unwell?"

Harutora came to his senses upon hearing the young girl's call.

"Kon?"

"Y-Y-Yes. I am extremely sorry for being so forward. Harutora-sama did not seem well, so....."

The voice of Harutora's shikigami, Kon, reached him. Her figure wasn't visible in her stealthed state, and hence she spoke up to ask out of worry for her master's condition. Harutora was suddenly a bit embarrassed, a bitter, shameful smile emerging on his face.

"Sorry for making you worry. I'm fine."

"That is good, but....."

At the same time as she replied this way, Kon's tone was still filled with worry. Harutora forced a smile.

Actually, this confusion was just pure imagination - no, it was wishful thinking. Reality didn't go along with Harutora's wishful thinking at all. It was probably just a bland truth that had been hidden. He frightened himself by how he had gotten so anxious on his own from his own wishful thinking.

Of course, it wasn't easy to suddenly change his attitude.

".....Hey, Kon."

"Y-Yes."

"I'm not very brave."

"Impossible! Y-Y-You are without a doubt.....!"

The shikigami's panicked denial was just favoritism towards Harutora. Harutora was thankful for her feelings, but they weren't enough to console him.

"Really, this isn't like my style at all. I get along well with people no matter who they are. I originally thought I was very good at interacting with people, but I got arrogant somehow."

Even more importantly, the other party was his own childhood friend. It had already been several months after he had come to Tokyo, and he originally thought there was no longer any gap between them, yet things had become like they were now.

"......Unexpected. I really hate this....."

Harutora hadn't been used to hesitating and worrying alone in the first place. The more his heart was troubled, the more he felt depressed, the less able he was to find a suitable way to deal with it.

"......Th, Then..... Harutora-sama?"

"Hmm?"

"Could it be, Harutora-sama, that you are worrying about the matter regarding Natsume-dono?"

"Uh..... Well, yeah. You've always been with me, so you understand too, I guess."

Harutora smiled wryly and gave an affirmative response. Actually, it was half self-derisive, not just any wry smile.

"It's actually as you say, Kon. But I'm extremely sorry, I can't talk with you about this. Please forgive your master's depression a little."

"Th-Th-This is a matter of course!"

Outside of Harutora's expectations, his shikigami denied her master's self-derogatory words.

Then,

"I, Kon, am well aware of H-H-Harutora-sama's troubles!"

"Huh?"

"Harutora-sama is very gentle, overly gentle, which became trouble!"

Kon spoke in snippets and full of self-confidence.

But, the shikigami's words pierced her master's chest all at once.

"Ah."

Harutora's face unconsciously twisted and he went speechless. Of course, Kon wasn't being deliberate, but those words felt like violent satire in Harutora's ears.

...Gentle?

No, that wasn't true.

It was the opposite.

...Yes, I..... Thinking carefully, I.....

Wasn't I always just thinking about my own feelings?

The suspicion had appeared in his heart on the bus back from the camp last month. After that, Harutora had been this troubled every day, no longer taking the feelings of those around him into account, and even letting his relationship with his friends grow worse and worse.

Whether Natsume was Hokuto's practitioner or not, Harutora had created such troubles because he didn't know how 'he himself' should face her, as well as because he didn't know how 'he himself' should organize the emotions in his heart if he learned that Natsume was Hokuto.

These weren't the feelings of Natsume or Hokuto.

They were just his own selfishness and capriciousness.

The strength suddenly drained out of Harutora's body and he feebly collapsed on the pedestrian road. "H-Harutora-sama!" The shocked Kon materialized, and a kimono-wearing girl with ears and a tail appeared next to Harutora.

"A-A-Are you feeling unwell? Please cheer up!"

"......Kon."

"Y-Y-Yes."

"Thanks for comforting me."

"Hmm?"

Kon's blue eyes widened. On the other hand, Harutora lowered his head, showing his self-derisive colors.

...Damn. I hate myself.....

Natsume's feelings..... right. If Hokuto was Natsume's shikigami, why hadn't she said so? Hokuto hadn't spoken of her history up through the very end. Was it because there was some reason that she couldn't say?

He thought about it but didn't understand that reason - No matter how he thought, he couldn't prove the relationship between Natsume and Hokuto - and Hence Harutora quite his judgments, giving up on continuing to think.

He hadn't even thought about what the person in question, Natsume, felt regarding the incident. Harutora had ignored anything like trying to understand her feelings up till now.

"...Ah, H-Harutora-sama."

"......I'm pathetic."

"No, well, H-Harutora-sama."

Kon shook Harutora's shoulder in a panic. Harutora's head was lowered in depression, revealing a nihilistic smile as he muttered quietly. "That's enough, you don't need to be concerned about me."

Harutora had forgotten to consider Natsume and Hokuto's feelings. This was enough to prove that Harutora was no longer able to look after other peoples' problems.

But, to think he hadn't noticed at all after being troubled for a month until his own shikigami pointed it out. His own problem was too severe.

"Someone like me, really....."

"Beast."

"Yes, I'm a beast - Hah?"

Harutora raised his head blankly in his posture with his hands touching the ground.

A pair of high boots that seemed familiar were close in front of him, with slim legs extending up from them.

As he raised his gaze further, he saw an overly large white uniform and a well-proportioned yet expressionless girl's face that looked unblinkingly at him with a cold gaze.

Harutora blinked.

"S, Senpai--"

"Beast."

"Huh?"

"You're doing this to sneak a peek under my skirt, right?"

"Huh? Ah, sorry. I didn't mean to."

"As compensation, I also want to see Kon-chan's panties--"

"Shut up, pervert!"

As he listlessly stood up, it suddenly became the other person looking up at Harutora.

She was extremely small, but probably older than Harutora. After all, she was a third-year Onmyou Academy senpai. Kon had probably shaken Harutora's shoulder just now to notify him that she was approaching.

Harutora rose. Kon went behind her master's back, unconsciously putting distance between her and the senpai. After Harutora confirmed that the shikigami had guarded herself, he nodded. He had given orders to Kon the past few days that she could put priority on defending herself only in front of this senpai.

Harutora looked at the senpai again:

"Good morning, senpai. You appeared as suddenly as always."

"Good morning. You took a long time to greet me."

The senpai's expression was hard to read. She seemed to be thinking about something, but he couldn't tell what it was at all. After all, this senpai would be hard to understand even if her expression was extremely plentiful.

"Kon-chan too, good morning."

"......Morning."

Kon returned the greeting nervously. The senpai stared at Kon without moving. Upon seeing her unmoving gaze, Harutora helplessly called out "Kon", walking to a position that blocked the senpai's gaze.

He called out "Senpai" to warn her. Of course, the senpai still didn't move.

"What's wrong, Harutora-kun."

"Oh, to think you remember my name this time."

"How rude. How could I forget?"

".....Enough, I'm probably already used to how you talk. I won't tsukkomi that kind of statement anymore."

"....."

"....."

"....."

".....Ah, don't you think it's a bit boring right now?"

"Fuck."[5]

The senpai said - probably - very hatefully. Successfully retaliating now after always being bullied one-sidedly felt extremely pleasant to Harutora. But from his lesson last time, he couldn't go too far.

Now that he thought of it, there was something from last time that he definitely couldn't forget.

"Ah! I thought of it. Senpai, to think you tricked me before!"

"When was this?"

"Don't pretend. It was during the camp!"

"I tricked you?"

"Of course you tricked me! I was so ashamed at the time!"

Harutora was extremely indignant. Her actions back then had been so excessive that he still carried resentment now.

But the senpai said indifferently:

"I don't remember."

"Lies!"

"Then let me ask, what did I say to trick you?"

"Huh? Uh, something like--"

"Something like! Can you be a bit more specific?"

"S, Specifically, when I thought senpai was skipping class, well - no, there was some reason--"

"I don't understand at all. Reason?"

"Didn't you say it!?"

"What? What specifically did I say?"

"Bastard..... You....."

The senpai was still expressionless as she raised her head to question Harutora. Harutora ground his teeth.

"I get it, I get it! The thing from back then doesn't matter anymore!"

"Of course. We're Onmyouji."

"Hah?"

"The one who gets tricked is at fault."

"Aren't you admitting it!?"

"Shut up, virgin."

"Ohhhh, this is the first time I've wanted to hit someone so badly!"

Before he realized it, he was already shouting retorts. It wasn't a lie to say he was mostly used to conversing with the senpai, but it seemed that he still had trouble taking control of the topic. No, it was more like he didn't have such plans, nor did he have the confidence to do so. Moreover, the senpai still seemed to resent Harutora saying 'shut up, pervert' right when they met.

As Harutora thought, the senpai stuck out her chest for some reason.

"Most importantly, I'm going to make sekihan[6]."

"You're still going? That's enough lying already!"

"It's not a lie."

"Then what is it?"

"It's just messing around with you--"

"I really want to hit you!"

Harutora's raised fist constantly trembled, but the senpai still seemed rather unconcerned:

"At least the child I'm going to give birth to hasn't lied yet."

She spoke with dignity. Harutora was already weary of anger.

"......Uh, senpai? You were lying just now, right? Or is everything you say just a lie?"

"Lies are the foundations of magic."

"Even so, senpai wasn't using magic just now, you were just purely lying."

"Well, the sekihan wasn't a lie."

"You're still talking?"

"People who like little girls can live forever."

"......So unfortunate. If you were a guy, I could report you right away....."

No, even if she was a girl, society should still raise sanctions against her, and as soon as possible. Harutora already felt a physical headache.

"Really..... Why are you so annoying right from the morning..... I would probably be a lot more relaxed if I could face myself like Senpai."

"Like me?"

"To tell the truth, I admire you a bit."

"You should stop now."

"Why?"

"You'll become a criminal."

"Ah, so someone like you has self-awareness too."

"Calling me by 'someone like you' is too rude."

"No, I think Senpai was the rudest in the conversation just now."

Before he realized it, his troubles regarding Natsume had already been left behind as he quipped. If this senpai were there, maybe he would be able to hold a normal conversation with Natsume. But, rather than a 'normal conversation', it would probably turn into him shouting angrily.

...Come to think of it, was this senpai like this when she spoke with other people?

Harutora had once mentioned to Natsume and the others that he had met a strange senpai and the topics that they chatted about. How would she react when she met other people?

"......Come to think of it, I still don't know Senpai's name. In the end, you still don't plan on telling me?"

"I can't give my name to a virgin."

"Ah, yes, yes. Then, I'll call you Senpai. Senpai. .....Ah, I'll give you a nickname, Little Girl Senpai, alright? That kind of straightforward nickname is extremely suitable for a little-girl senpai who will live forever, right?"

".....Little Girl Senpai."

"Yes."

"....."

The senpai raised her head and stared unblinkingly at Harutora, and Harutora lowered his head to stare at the senpai without moving.

Just then, the senpai suddenly turned around:

"...I'm very proud."

"You're mistaken! Also, what are you getting shy about!?"

"Harutora-kun, you can do it pretty well if you try."

"Uh, thanks--"

"Now if only I had a shikigami like Kon....."

"Please stop! That shikigami would be too pitiful! Anyway, that's the one thing I can't do!"

"But, it doesn't seem like an honorific."

"It's not an honorific in the first place! It's an insult!"

"Ah, but--"

"What now!"

"Please shout loudly when you call me by that name. You have to pronounce it clearly."

"Understood! I'll call you Senpai like normal, Senpai!"

Harutora, who was no longer sure how serious his jokes were, gradually became impatient. If the other party were a male - or a kouhai of his, he would shout at him with no reservations. How unfortunate.

Incidentally, Kon was probably also thinking about the same thing. She hid behind Harutora's back, but her hands felt for her sheathed beloved blade Kachiwari. She could instantly release her overwhelming force once she received his order of 'go'. Even if senpai died under Kon's blade, it would probably be quite fulfilling for her.

Compared to Harutora, whose substantial energy was dwindling, Senpai turned to the next topic almost without missing a beat.

"Come to think of it, Harutora-kun, do you have any worries?"

"I do, but they have nothing at all to do with Senpai.

"Talk to me about them as compensation."

"Listen to what I say! Didn't I say they had nothing to do with Senpai!? Why are you this happy! Is it because of the nickname just now!?"

"Seventy points."

"So weird! ...Whatever, I don't want to talk. I'm afraid I would like to be excused."

"But you're troubled, right?"

"I said, I won't tell Senpai about it."

"To get straight to the point..... it's love, then."

"I haven't said anything yet!"

"But it's definitely love, right?'

"W, Well....."

"In the end, a virgin's love--"

"I made a mistake talking to you!"

Even if he looked for people to talk to, he definitely wouldn't have come to this senpai. Though he was a bit more tolerant than other people, Harutora still had self-esteem.

But, the senpai seemed to see through Harutora's thoughts:

"No, it's the opposite."

"Eh?"

"You can only talk about it because it's me. Because our lives don't cross."

"Ah....."

Indeed, some things could only be easily said to people who were unrelated. Senpai shouldn't understand Harutora's situation at all, but it might be possible for her to make a suggestion as a third party.

Even so, Harutora's conclusion was:

"No."

Only that.

"I'm thankful for your feelings - Well, it's just a polite thanks, please accept it."

He spoke politely and with a cold look.

"I see. Then I'll just tell you what I think."

"Sorry, Senpai. I'm an idiot, so I don't understand what you mean."

"I'll give my idiot kouhai some suggestions in case you feel like talking about your troubles with me."

"......If you're just saying it....."

Harutora muttered wearily.

With a serious face, the senpai:

"There's no reason to worry."

Told him this.

Harutora showed an expression that he had already prepared, "Uwah--", raising his hands in a fake cheer.

"Uwah, you made me think about your suggestion during the camp. I'm extremely thankful, Senpai. You helped me out a lot, a great deal."[7]

A sense of disgust showed in his unrepressed voice.

But the Senpai wasn't concerned.

"After all, your worries will soon become meaningless."

"Hah..... Well, come to think of it, it's probably pretty unnecessary already."

At least at the moment. Harutora sighed.

Just then:

"Harutora?"

Harutora jumped upon hearing an interruption from behind him.

"Touji--"

"What's wrong, I didn't think you would still be here. You'll be late."

Touji, who hurried up from behind, spoke blandly.

It was one of the rare days when Touji woke up late, so Harutora had left the dorm ahead of him. It seemed that he had caught up. Upon hearing Touji, Harutora checked the time displayed on his phone. "Ha, we're in trouble."

Then,

"Ah, right, Touji. I mentioned to you before, this person is 'that' senpai. ...Senpai, this person--"

"...Ato Touji."

"Eh? You know him?"

Harutora asked back in a fluster, but unfortunately, the senpai stared at Touji and didn't reply. Touji seemed to have already noticed the Senpai, and seemed to recall after hearing Harutora say 'that senpai'.

He pulled back his neck slightly:

"Hello."

And greeted her.

"I'm the second-year Ato."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Suzu."

"You gave him your name!?"

Harutora shouted.

"Hey! W-Why! You didn't tell me at all, so why are you telling Touji so simply! Also, 'Suzu' is your whole name? You stated your first name directly without even your surname! You should have told me at the start if you didn't plan on hiding it!"

Hence, Harutora was taken aback. The senpai didn't react like always, ignoring Harutora and staring unmovingly at Touji.

On the other hand, even Touji felt a bit confused. But, a bit of weirdness actually stimulated his curiosity more. With a pleased gaze, he surveyed the senpai observing him.

"Really....."

Harutora sighed deeply with a bitter expression.

Just then, the senpai that Touji was watching suddenly looked towards Harutora with her peripheral vision. Just as Harutora noticed, she immediately looked back at Touji.

Then, she slowly:

".....So cool."

"Wait! Why are you using my face as a comparison before you say that!?"

"Why, you ask..... I can't say something so mean."

"You already said it! And it was extremely mean!"

"Don't mention it, Harutora. If you keep talking, you'll just hurt yourself more."

"Why are you helping, Touji!"

"Hey. I don't know what this despicable friend told you, but it was all a lie."

"Extremely unfortunately, what you just said already verified what I told him!"

Touji unconsciously laughed upon seeing Harutora shout agitatedly.

Their brief interaction was probably sufficient to let Touji understand the senpai's peculiarity. But Touji, who always got carried away quickly, seemed to have a new question.

"I see. Well, you're mostly the same as I imagined - Yeah, even a bit more than what I imagined. As expected of a senpai. The Onmyou Academy is really a hidden dragon's den."

"......Touji, are you happy, by any chance?"

"Don't fret, Harutora, this is reality."

"I'm not fretful at all!"

His friend's betrayal made Harutora gnash his teeth. Touji laughed, thumping Harutora's chest as a joke.

Just then,

The senpai who was still looking at Touji:

"......Even more powerful than I imagined, and there aren't any problems for now."

Muttered quietly. Touji, whose ears caught those words, looked towards the senpai.

After meeting the senpai's gaze for a moment, "......Eh?" an uneasy smile slid across his mouth.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

An interested, but extremely provocative tone.

Harutora inadvertently got the chills. Come to think about it, Touji was the kind of guy who basically didn't show respect to his senpais.

But, the senpai didn't say anything more inciting.

"Don't worry, it doesn't have any deep meaning."

She replied, her expression still hard to decipher.

If Touji was as familiar with the senpai as Harutora, he probably could have continued to find out the senpai's meaning. But Touji, who wasn't polite except when necessary, didn't reach the solution of continuing to ask the senpai. His look just became a bit strange and he looked at the senpai again.

Then, the senpai:

"Then, I'm going."

After saying this, she turned her back to Harutora and Touji. She didn't reply even after hearing Harutora call out "Senpai", leaving with small steps. She came as she pleased and left as she pleased, just like always.

But,

"......Touch."

"Yah!"

"Hey, don't just touch Kon's tail while you're walking by! Are you a sexually harassing old man!?"

Kon leaped to graph Harutora. Harutora held his shikigami's shoulder, cursing the senpai from behind. The senpai didn't turn back, lightly raising her hand in a casual manner.

With half-widened eyes, Touji watched the back of the senpai as she left.

"How is it? A very weird person, right?"

"......Yes. I'm a bit concerned....."

"Well, I'm indeed concerned about a few areas..... Was it a coincidence?"

After hearing Harutora's question, Touji hesitated a moment, "......No," replying briefly.

"......Well, let's go, Harutora. Ohtomo-sensei has the first class. He'll probably nag for half the day again if we're late."

Part 4

The second-year classroom was unusually noisy when Harutora and Touji opened the door.

Just as Harutora and Touji had entered the academy building, they had already sensed several oddities that were reasons the students in the class were noisy.

Natsume, Kyouko, and Tenma were gathered together talking in the classroom. The expressions of the three all showed tension.

Kyouko was the first to notice the two of them, calling out to them. "Harutora, Touji."

When Natsume realized, her gaze met Harutora's and Harutora unconsciously wavered. That vacillation seemed to affect Natsume.....

"...Natsume, I was late in the morning, sorry."

"Eh? Yeah. It's alright."

He spoke openly, putting aside his individual feelings for now. With that, the tone he let out was unexpectedly smooth and natural. Natsume also showed a bit of a surprised expression and replied honestly.

But, the conversation suddenly stopped there. The two of them both averted their gazes as if they had trouble dealing with the awkward situation before them. It really was hard to change quickly.

But,

...Yeah. The situation just now hadn't been bad, right?

Right now, his emotions no longer mattered. He couldn't continue making Natsume's mood worsen. Harutora hoped that he could build his actions upon that principle. He spurred himself on again. Even if he couldn't produce instant results, he couldn't keep escaping his responsibility.

But, there was a more concerning situation right now than interacting with Natsume.

"Harutora, Touji, you noticed too?"

Kyouko spoke with a serious expression. Harutora and Touji nodded to reply.

"Alpha and Omega, right? I feel like they weren't like normal."

"The atmosphere of the academy is a bit different, especially the teachers."

The two of them elaborated on their own observations.

The Alpha and Omega that Harutora mentioned were the two komainu that guarded the entrance of the academy building. Of course, they weren't normal komainu, but rather shikigami that the principal used. They were named mechanical-type shikigami, as their physical forms were controlled by their vessels. They were commonly known as the academy door guards.

The two komainus' tones were ancient, and they were actually extremely honest. For some reason, their attitudes were a bit proud, but they thought about the students. They always greeted the students when school started and ended, and were quite popular among the students.

But, Alpha and Omega were different from normal this morning. They didn't have any greeting, nor did they show their proud attitudes like normal. The aura and sonic inspections also took longer than usual. Hence, there had even been a slight congestion around the entrance.

Moreover, the teachers were also on tenterhooks. Especially the teachers responsible for practical skills coursework, who had been continually patrolling the academy like they were on alert for something. They replied vaguely when asked for a reason.

"......And that's not all."

This time Natsume pitched in.

"The academy building's barrier was also strengthened. ......It wasn't this strong this time yesterday. That means that the barrier was strengthened overnight after we left the academy. To think such a large-scale barrier was upgraded in one go."

Touji's gaze moved to the side upon hearing Natsume's words. It was hard to tell from inside the building, but Natsume wasn't lying.

"Hey, Kyouko. Did the principal say anything?"

"She didn't come home yesterday. Seems like she stayed at the academy."

Kyouko faced Harutora, shaking her head.

Principal Kurahashi was Kyouko's grandmother. After hearing Harutora say "Is that usual?" to confirm, she thought for a moment with a fretful expression.

"Well, it's occasionally like that..... I sent her a message this morning, but she hasn't replied yet. She usually replies instantly."

"......I see. So that means the principal's very busy right now?"

Touji muttered as if speaking to himself. Harutora and Natsume inadvertently looked at each other. Tenma, who heard that remark, swallowed.

".....Are they preparing for something? Like maybe training for a fire evacuation.....?"

".....Even if it were evacuation training, the probability of a 'fire' is very low, right?'

Touji said with a bold and fearless tone.

Then, he looked at Natsume:

"Natsume. Do you have Yukikaze's charm on you right now?"

"Yeah, because I can't carelessly leave it in the dorm. I always bring it with me."

"Good. .....Harutora. Go underground and pick up the shakujou right away. It's safer to carry it around with you today."

".....Got it."

Harutora nodded his head honestly upon hearing his good friend's suggestion.

The shakujou Touji mentioned was a tool Ohtomo had created for Harutora - a magical tool, which could mostly make up for the poor skills of the practitioner and help Harutora control his strong magical energy to a certain level. When he was a first-year, he had used it in the fights against the Yakou fanatic and the Type-Chimera. Harutora often used the shakujou when he trained by himself, so he normally left it in the locker room of the magic practice field.

Also, Yukikaze was a high-level white horse shikigami that served the Tsuchimikado family. As an ancient shikigami, its battle experience was plentiful. It had originally been kept in her family's residence, but had been entrusted to Natsume after the spiritual disaster attack in the spring.

".....Hey, Touji. Have you noticed something?"

"Not at all. But, if we don't do this, we won't be able to do anything after something happens, right?"

Touji smiled as he spoke to the wide-eyed, staring Kyouko.

"Well, don't worry. After all, this is the Onmyou Academy building. It's well-equipped and there are professionals around. On a magical level, there aren't many places in Tokyo safer than here. Even if something happens, we probably won't have to take the stage."

"So anyways, we don't need to be this worried--"

"However, Tenma. It's stupid to not do anything because we don't have the opportunity to take the stage, and we can't make any progress. If it's not evacuation training, then it's a drill in advance of a true enemy attack. We have to treat things like advance drills seriously for them to have any meaning."

Touji said this, knowingly patting Tenma's shoulder. Everything he said was reasonable, but what made him concerned was his restless air. His trouble-loving blood was boiling again. He had inadvertently become more energetic than usual.

But, Harutora also agreed with Touji's opinion.

"Then, I'll go get it."

He prepared to leave the classroom as he said this, but just then, the teacher pushed open the door and walked in.

"Class is starting. Sit down, everyone."

He spoke in a cloudy voice and walked to the podium. But, it wasn't Ohtomo who walked in, but rather a different teacher.

"Eh? Sensei, wasn't it Ohtomo-sensei's class today?"

Harutora immediately spoke up to ask.

The teacher looked at Harutora:

"...Ohtomo-sensei has urgent business and can't come to class. Alright, please return to your seats."

His tone was coarse and he replied bluntly. He sounded like he were just arbitrarily dealing with the question, or maybe blocking opportunities for any further questions.

He felt increasingly uneasy. Harutora quickly glanced around. Natsume, Touji, Kyouko, and Tenma seemed to share his feelings.

"......Something probably truly happened."

The words Touji quietly murmured made Harutora shiver.

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He couldn't get the bad premonition out of his chest. Harutora didn't wait until the class break period, ordering Kon to go underground to get the shakujou from the changing room during class.

At the same time, he sent Suzuka a message, warning her to be careful.

The reply was very brief:

"I don't need you to tell me that."

Just those few words.

He would learn from their interaction afterwards that the students in the first-year classroom also felt the same abnormal atmosphere. The teachers were so nervous that even those who had just entered the academy noticed it.

On the other hand, Kyouko had already sent several messages to the principal but hadn't received a single response. In the end, she called her directly during the class break period, and after the dialing sound, it immediately went to voice mail.

"......I'll go see directly."

Leaving those words, Kyouko rushed out of the classroom. Not long afterwards, she returned in a hurry. It seemed that the principal wasn't in the principal's office. Her panicked actions portrayed the anxiety in her heart.

"Ohtomo-sensei has business and the principal's not here either. ...Touji, do you know Fujiwara-sensei's mail address?"

"I don't. But you probably won't be able to find him. I heard from students in his class, and it seems that all the teachers responsible for practical classes are gone."

Just as Touji said, the practical skills class that Harutora's class anticipated afterwards had been completely changed into a lecture. It seemed that they no longer paid any heed to the students' questions and suspicions. The tense feeling that floated around in the silence seemed to be waiting attentively for something.

As Harutora and the others wondered, the curriculum went on systematically.

Ohtomo wasn't here, and the students still didn't get any messages back. But, the other teachers' attitudes were like always, and the time passed uneventfully.

At some point, the bell for lunchtime had already sounded. At that point, the students' upsurge of tension had slowly begun to ease up.

"What exactly is going on? Could it be that they're planning a surprise for the entire Onmyou Academy?"

"Well..... It's possible, if it's my grandma."

Kyouko replied wryly upon hearing Harutora's sarcasm.

They had passed a high-strung morning, but in the end nothing had happened at all, so it had just been a waste of effort. Harutora had even sent Kon to look around the academy in the morning because he was so concerned. Tenma's tension seemed to have affected his body, as he held his stomach with a pale face.

Only Natsume and Touji were still tense. Even so, compared to before, the latter didn't seem tense at all on the outside. He was someone who enjoyed this kind of situation, so it was natural.

".....Touji. Does it really have nothing to do with me? Dairenji-san mentioned Yakou fanatics before....."

"The Twin-Horned Syndicate? No, I think this has nothing to do with them."

Touji immediately replied to Natsume's question.

"Why?" Towards Natsume, who asked this:

"Think about it. If it were action related to Yakou fanatics, the principal would no longer be able to hide you at this point. Actually, it should be the opposite, she would call for you immediately and warn you to be careful."

"Y, Yeah. I agree with Touji-kun's point. The principal called Natsume-kun over during the Nue incident."

"However, Tenma. At the time, it was because the Onmyou Agency requested for her assistance, right? They wanted to use Natsume's dragon in their operation."

"That was a special situation. If there really was danger approaching Natsume-kun, even if the principal herself was silent, the teachers would focus their defense around Natsume-kun. Today - it's hard to say, probably dealing with a spiritual disaster attack? The fact that they increased the academy building's barrier particularly matches that."

"I think the same as Kyouko. Supposing the opponent was Yakou fanatics - or the Twin-Horned Syndicate that Dairenji mentioned - their target would be limited to Natsume."

Touji repeated his conclusion again, but Natsume still didn't let it go.

"If people attack the Onmyou Academy, their target must be me--"

Natsume didn't want to see the safety of other students impacted because of herself. Even if Touji and Kyouko denied such a possibility, she still had trouble relaxing.

But,

"Natsume."

After hearing Harutora call her name, Natsume didn't continue speaking, silently returning his gaze.

"I understand your feelings. Involving other people in your matters because of yourself would definitely feel bad. But, you're not the only one thinking that way. The teachers are definitely worried about everyone's safety the most."

"Well....."

Natsume couldn't rebuke her childhood friend's advice.

Harutora's gazed directly into Natsume's eyes.

"You indeed might be a target, since after all so much happened before. But, the teachers are acting while considering those factors. You can't have too much confidence in others, but the teachers are trustworthy."

"Harutora."

Natsume looked back at Harutora, seeming to want to say something, but in the end she just lightly nodded her head. She honestly abandoned her position.

Touji shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, they're holding class like always while being on guard. From that, the principal isn't sure what exactly is going on either."

".....Yeah. Some sort of dangerous 'omen' has probably appeared, so she's being a bit careful."

"But the principal's a first-class diviner, right? If a dangerous 'omen' appeared and she's staying on alert, then something really is going to happen....."

The principal was an extremely famous diviner - and astrologer. Her vague predictions had reached a bad future, so the Onmyou Academy had been put on a state of alert. That was a reasonable inference. But, if it were like that, it was very likely that something would happen in the end.

After hearing Tenma's words, everyone inadvertently closed their mouth.

Just then, a message ringtone suddenly sounded. It was Harutora's phone, from Suzuka.

"What is it?"

"Ah. 'What are you all dawdling about!' It seems that she's already in the cafeteria."

Since the camp, Suzuka would always eat lunch with Harutora and the others regardless of any reasons and excuses. She pretended that she didn't care, but she would specifically send an urging message if she didn't see Harutora and the others. Her true feelings were evident from this.

After hearing about the contents of the message, Kyouko completely forgot about the serious talk just now, breaking out into a smile.

"It seems like Suzuka-chan's hungry. Let's hurry up and go eat."

Kyouko's cheerful tone made Harutora and the others inadvertently lose their strength. Carrying the shakujou for now, they left the classroom together and walked towards the cafeteria.

The cafeteria was at the top of the academy building, and hence the broad horizon could be seen outside the window, but the day still hadn't cleared up.

They had probably gotten here a bit late. The cafeteria was already filled with people.

But, the instant Harutora and the others entered:

"Ah, Darling! Honestly, you're so late~"

Suzuka deliberately put on an intimate attitude, rushing over immediately.

"You're so annoying! What were you doing, you're too slow!"

Then she suddenly changed her tone, mercilessly scolding him in a tone that no one around could hear.

But, he was completely used to her suddenly changing like this.

"......Hey, exactly how long are you going to act this out for?"

"Hah? How many times do I have to say for you to understand! You and I are different, I have the position of the 'Child Prodigy'. Can you please not speak to me with that kind of know-it-all tone!"

"Yeah, Harutora. Most importantly, she's also very cute that way. Right?"

"Shut up! You shut up!"

Kyouko's teasing made Suzuka's gaze suddenly sharpen. A quarrel just like always. Harutora and the others chose their lunches for now, taking their trays and looking for seats.

Fortunately, since they were late, their timing hadn't been bad. There were some unoccupied window seats.

Harutora and the other five people sat in the same group of seats.

"How are the first-years?"

Touji immediately questioned Suzuka.

"Nothing much. Probably about the same as the second-years."

"In other words, you have no practical classes, and it's all lectures. ...The first-years don't have many practical classes in the first place."

"One boring day after another. It's like hell."

"You can't help that, Suzuka-chan. It's Suzuka-chan's punishment."

Yeah, Suzuka, you have to endure it."

"Shut up! I don't want to be told that by you guys! Especially Darling! In the end, it was all your fault!"

"You still want to mention that incident? Give it a break."

At some point, cursing of this level had no longer been able to affect Harutora. Their table of six began their noisy lunch time with Harutora, Suzuka, and Kyouko ad the center.

But, as they ate, Touji casually listened to the conversations of the students around them. The noisiness of Harutora's table was already a custom, but the tables around them were just as bad today. Needless to say, the topic was naturally the suspicious actions of the teachers. The atmosphere during class had been tense, so people didn't really dare to flagrantly whisper. Lunchtime was as if they had obtained their freedom, and most of the students unleashed their deductive abilities and powers of imagination as much as possible.

But, none of the students reached a conclusion. Since the teachers had kept mum, there was little information.

Among them, there were students who secretly peeked towards Harutora and the others - especially Natsume. Leaving aside the newly-entered first-years for now, Natsume's 'rumor' was now widespread within the academy. Everyone was probably thinking the same thing.

The person in question, Natsume, seemed to notice the gazes shot from around her. She alone didn't join the conversation at the table, silently eating her lunch.

Harutora, who sat next to her, said:

"......Don't concern yourself."

At the same time he spoke quietly, he stopped moving his chopsticks.

Neither of them looked at the other, but not long after,

"......Yeah."

She lightly replied.

It was a frank voice that didn't sound contrived. Harutora hadn't heard it for a while. Strangely, heat flowed forth in his chest just by hearing that voice.

At the same time, he was taken aback. Her voice was completely different, yet felt extremely familiar.

To Hokuto's voice.

"....."

Harutora accelerated his eating speed. After Suzuka noticed, she furrowed her brows uneasily.

Just then, a male student suddenly kicked a chair and stood up from a table in the center of the cafeteria.

With an excited face:

"Hey! Big news! Not long ago, the Onmyou Agency was attacked by a mysterious Onmyouji!"

All the gazes in the cafeteria gathered on that male student. Of course, Harutora and the others were the same. They watched the yelling boy.

"Hey! What's going on? Don't be ridiculous!"

"It's true! My brother works in the Onmyou Agency offices! He told me in a message just now. The Exorcist Bureau forces have already started fighting!"

The boy returned a bit angrily.

Then,

"Wait! It's not a lie! I got a message too. A big battle is happening in the Onmyou Agency building right now. Several of the Twelve Divine Generals are there, and they're quickly counterattacking right now!"

A girl at another table stared at her phone screen and shouted. The cafeteria suddenly sent into an uproar.

Harutora and the other five stared blankly at each other.

"Could it be....."

"That was it."

Something like attacking the Onmyou Agency in broad daylight was unheard of. That was probably the matter that the Onmyou Academy had been on guard for today.

"I, I see..... That's good."

Tenma inadvertently voiced his inner feelings, but immediately noticed that he had gaffed, hastily apologizing. But to be honest, Harutora and the others felt the same way. Natsume was still stunned, but Touji seemed a bit disappointed.

"Well..... It's hard to imagine these kinds of circumstances. It really was just an ordinary advance drill."

"Hey, Touji. It's really not that relaxed right now. Won't it be very serious?"

"It's possible - the Onmyou Agency building is near Akihabara. There might be some real collateral damage."

Touji spun his chopsticks, bored.

Next to him,

".....Why does it matter? Though we don't know what idiot did it. There are several Divine Generals there, so it looks like the Onmyou Agency did enough work beforehand. It's very possible that there will be no damage."

Suzuka said this. She had been taken aback just now, but unlike Harutora and the others, she knew the power of the Onmyou Agency, so she didn't seem panicked.

Honestly, The Onmyou Agency building had one of the strongest magical defenses among magic-related facilities. More importantly, there were several National First-Class Onmyouji who had made battle preparations beforehand, so there shouldn't be any practitioner or magic organization able to destroy that. It was probably impossible to avoid all injuries, but they could undoubtedly keep them to the minimum level.

After hearing Suzuka's calm remark, the tension of Harutora and the others rapidly alleviated.

".....I see."

Harutora said this, suddenly leaning back into his chair.

".....Haha. Well, just like Touji said, it's not a bad practice drill."

The cafeteria was still generally noisy with students. Only that spectacle could show how serious an incident this was, as Kyouko had said. But, at least the possibility that Harutora and the others would get dragged into things was extremely small. The six people here mostly felt safe from concern about the incident.

Harutora's relaxed his face, looking out the window.

He hadn't gone to the Onmyou Agency offices before, and of course, he couldn't see them from here, nor did he even know what direction they were. There was

currently a large-scale magic battle happening there, which was really hard to believe.

The Shibuya that he saw outside the window was covered by low-altitude gray clouds. The gloomy weather was exactly the same as when he had left the dorm.

Suddenly,

Harutora's gaze dropped from the sky to the ground.

Harutora looked at the front of the academy building, in front of the window. The entrance Alpha and Omega guarded was over there.

Down below,

A black, high-class car that he recognized was stopped in front of the academy building.

Harutora's thinking stopped there.

Then, his hair stood on end.

Chapter 3 - Onmyouji, Visiting

Part 1

Not far from the main entrance of the Onmyou Academy building, which was a pair of automatic doors, was a low staircase continuing into a wide, tiled plaza.

A high-class black sedan that appeared turned in to the plaza, silently stopping in front of the stairs.

Not long after,

The backseat door of the car opened and an old man slowly walked out, standing in the plaza.

A kimono-wearing old man.

His body was small and he held a staff. He wore a black mantle over his black clothes. Only his sunglasses were red as blood. His plumage-like hair ran towards the back of his head.

He was probably quite old - he seemed more like a dead person or a mummy. His wrinkled face didn't have anything like an expression, and one would even suspect whether he was a live or not.

The old man leisurely raised his head to look at the Onmyou Academy building.

The building towering in the dim sky had been erected not too long ago. The outer surface was inlaid with black granite, and there were red embellishments placed everywhere to fill the exterior with an overall sense of enclosure. The modern style simultaneously showed a solemn impression like a temple's.

If one used spirit-seeing to 'look', he would probably be able to notice that the building was completely covered by a magical defensive barrier. Though the barrier was invisible, it was extremely strong. Moreover, a suddenly-added new magic could be 'seen' on the ancient magic. It wasn't hard to surmise that someone had especially added it anticipating an enemy.

"......Well then."

The voice that came from the old man's dry, cracked lips was unexpectedly youthful.

Instantly, the automatic doors at the entrance opened from the inside.

It wasn't a person who walked out of the academy building, but rather a calico cat.

The cat's tail was perfect straight. It walked out of the academy with dignity, arriving in front of the stairs and staring at the old man.

The old man's strange figure was reflected in the cat's large eyes.

"...It's been a long time, Priest Doman."

The cat spoke. It was Principal Kurahashi's voice. This calico cat was a shikigami the principal used.

The old man who had been referred to as Priest Doman - Ashiya Doman - gracefully greeted the cat.

"The previous head of the Kurahashi family. Have we met before, if you say 'it's been a long time'?"

"Yes, when I was a child."

"I see. I remember now. You were the Kurahashi family miko by Yakou's side, right?"

Doman nodded joyfully, but one could only realize his joyful feelings through the tone he spoke in. His expression didn't change a bit.

"The little girl at that time became the current 'Kurahashi Stargazer', I see. Hoho. You truly cannot anticipate people's changes."

"But," Doman continued to speak.

"It must be said that it was because of Yakou, you know. I have grown old and believe I am able to identify talented people, but it's hard to read that person."

"......That is why you want to witness the fates of different people."

"Indeed. In line with the experience of a principal."

Doman said this and then laughed 'ke, ke'.

Even when he smiled, his face barely moved. His youthful, emotion-filled voice was a stark comparison with his corpse-like outer appearance.

"...Priest."

The Principal called out again.

"If you agree with my opinion, please leave here. The academy is a school to nurture Onmyouji. So the students in the school are all people whose futures are worth the wait. I wish to avoid unnecessary chaos."

The principal argued respectfully.

In comparison, Doman smiled lightly again.

"That's why it's interesting. My words may be a bit arrogant, but those who want to become Onmyouji could 'meet' existences like this old man face-to-face. Isn't it a valuable opportunity?"

"You speak reason, but in the end they are fledgling chicks - they cannot accept the great wings of a master."

"How regretful. Then I will leave after finishing my business, how is that?'

"......What business?'

"Do not feign ignorance. You've also heard, right? Yakou's 'Raven's Wing'. I want to borrow it."

Doman calmly brought up his request.

The cat's tail waved cautiously.

"......I have indeed heard rumors of Priest wishing to borrow the 'Raven's Wing'. But I still do not know Priest's reasons. What business are you borrowing the 'Raven's Wing' for?"

"Ah, to be honest, it's my shikigami's need, not mine."

Doman spoke the truth without reservations. The cat's whiskers twitched in confusion after hearing. Doman said strangely, "We over here have various reasons", smiling.

Then, the cat and Doman silently stared at each other.

The corpse-like, all-black, stiff-bodied old man and the calico cat that confronted him. In some sense, it looked like a cat attentively gazing at an invisible dead spirit.

But, this black-colored dead spirit wasn't from the underworld. He stood in the real world.

"Priest, allow me to tell you. The 'Raven's Wing' is not in the Onmyou Academy right now."

"Oh. Is that so?"

"It is the truth."

"Alright. I had originally planning on conducting an investigation myself."

"Priest. Let me repeat again, there are only underage chicks inside. Your attempt is too unreasonable - no, it's too rude. Please leave immediately."

The principal spoke with an ice-cold tone.

That remark was enough to be considered heroic in front of a legendary Onmyouji. The cat kept its attention on Doman, its unyielding attitude giving off an awe-inspiring air inconsistent with a kitten.

But, Doman wasn't moved at all.

Ke, ke, ke. He laughed quietly.

".....Well, 'Kurahashi Stargazer'. You were just a little girl when you were with Yakou. Even though you became famous as an astrologist afterwards, we never met again. You've grown, huh?"

An unexpected question made the cat's ears sway lightly.

"That is true. .....What of it?"

"No, it's nothing. Your manner of speech is very strange. I could understand if you were someone without battle experience."

"What does that mean?"

This time it was the principal who asked back. Doman joyfully shrugged his shoulders.

"At the least, the brats you're sheltering under you definitely wouldn't say the same things. In the world we live in, 'courtesy' indicates 'skill'."

"Skill?"

"Exactly. In the ancient past strength was produced from the association between man and god, but now it is from the association between man and man. 'Courtesy' is the skills, customs, and patterns emerged to make use of this strength. Of course, the rules of etiquette that you speak of have the same roots. Unfortunately, in my world, 'courtesy' is applied in its original form. Tragically, 'courtesy' unaccompanied by 'skill' is simply prattle. Or rather - rudeness."[8]

Doman raised his staff with one hand.

The cat's entire body tensed up. Doman laughed with a cackle.

"This old man has no plans of being 'courteous'."

Right as the words left his mouth, Doman swung the staff held before him behind his head.

The front of the staff tapped the sedan stopped behind him - the cover of the trunk on the back of the car.

The car instantly trembled and the cover of the trunk opened as if someone underneath had lifted it up. A black-colored torrent inside spewed out and burst out.

"Ah!"

The cat unconsciously retreated backwards.

The cat's vision followed the flowing black torrent. It extended upwards like a rocket, the front of it already reaching a height where it could touch the academy building, then it scattered messily, beginning to spread into the surroundings. After the cat observed the truth behind the torrent, the fur bristled over its entire body.

"Shikigami? This is all a shikigami?"

Like a pillar formed by a giant group of insects, it continuously crept up from the ground. A frightful quantity and a frightful magical energy.

On the other hand, Doman extended his staff again amidst the principal's shouts, announcing in a light tone.

"You won't let me touch the fledglings? .....In the end, if they're chicks whose wings would be broken by an attack of this level, it's this old man's responsibility as a senpai to break them."

☆

"...He's come!"

After receiving Principal Kurahashi's message, the former Exorcist teacher Fujiwara's face twitched.

".....It really would have been better to cancel classes."

Of course, last night they had considered the idea of cancelling the Onmyou Academy classes for today. But, rashly taking an unnatural action might draw 'D's attention instead, so in the end they hadn't done so. Considering the situation at the time, the probability that he appeared at the Onmyou Academy hadn't been high.

In the end, that judgment had been mistaken, but the Onmyou Academy obviously had no plans of quietly acquiescing.

Fujiwara received the message and immediately rushed to the staff room on the second floor of the building.

To the surrounding teachers:

"The information in the morning was true! Everyone, begin evacuating the students! The main entrance is unusable, have all the students escape to shelter through the back entrance!"

The Onmyou Academy had already made a plan of action beforehand for when 'D' appeared in the academy. The safety of the students was the top priority, and hence even the teachers who didn't have class today had been summoned.

Among them, the practical skills teachers had suspended the coursework originally scheduled for today, inspecting magical charms, tools, and equipment and preparing for the upcoming magic battle.

"Immediately contact the Onmyou Agency and the Exorcist Bureau. The Onmyou Agency building seems to also have been attacked. They're probably a decoy. The Meguro branch squad should be able to come over immediately.....!"

There were Exorcist Bureau branches in Shinjuku and Meguro in addition to the headquarters. Fujiwara used his past network of contacts to mediate. Though most of the team members were deployed in the Onmyou Agency building in Akihabara, the lowest-ranked members were still left in the branches.

They probably wouldn't be able to make it if they came from Akihabara. But the Shinjuku and Meguro branches should be able to make it, and then it was just a question of time. Exactly how long would the Onmyou Academy be able to hold out for?

But,

"Fujiwara! Outside!"

A teacher near the window shouted. Fujiwara rushed out to the window and then stared blankly. A strange black monster was thrashing outside the window.

"That man's shikigami.....!"

At the same time, the sound of a message rang out from his phone from the practical skills teacher who had been deployed at the back entrance beforehand to ensure safety.

"There are too many! They've already gone around to the back entrance! Breaking through to evacuate from there will be difficult!"

His colleague's report made Fujiwara clench his teeth.

But, the enemy's shikigami hadn't entered the interior of the academy. No, it couldn't enter, because of the academy's barrier.

When Principal Kurahashi had been formulating countermeasures, she had imagined 'D' as a National First-Class Onmyouji - even treating him like an Independent Exorcist. Actually, 'D's strength was unknown, but in any case, braking the barrier head-on would probably take quite a long time.

".....Okay. Change to the plan for a siege. Bring the students underground immediately! Have them take shelter in the magic practice field!"

The academy's barrier was extremely strong, but the barrier placed on the underground magic practice field was even more outstanding. It served as a safety area for when the inside of the academy suffered magical attacks, and its size was sufficient to fit all of the students.

"Hurry! The enemy's attack is coming!"

The teachers received Fujiwara's orders and sprinted out of the staff room one by one.

Suddenly,

".....Hold on. Have you received communication from Ohtomo-kun?"

He asked a clerk who was sitting blankly in a chair, who immediately answered Fujiwara's question after suddenly being talked to.

"No. O-Ohtomo-sensei hasn't come to the staff room yet today--"

"......I see."

Yesterday, Fujiwara and Ohtomo had learned via the principal the information that 'D' might attack today. Afterwards, Fujiwara had immediately summoned the teachers to formulate a plan for today with the practical skills teachers as the core. But Ohtomo had suddenly vanished and couldn't be contacted. The principal seemed to know the situation to some degree, but to Fujiwara, his whereabouts were still unclear.

Fujiwara had heard that Ohtomo had originally been a Mystical Investigator, and he had seen his impressive power first-hand. In the current situation, he was an invaluable fighting power.....

"......All we can do now is focus on dealing with what's in front of us."

Fujiwara's face twitched and he left the staff room following the other teachers.

Part 2

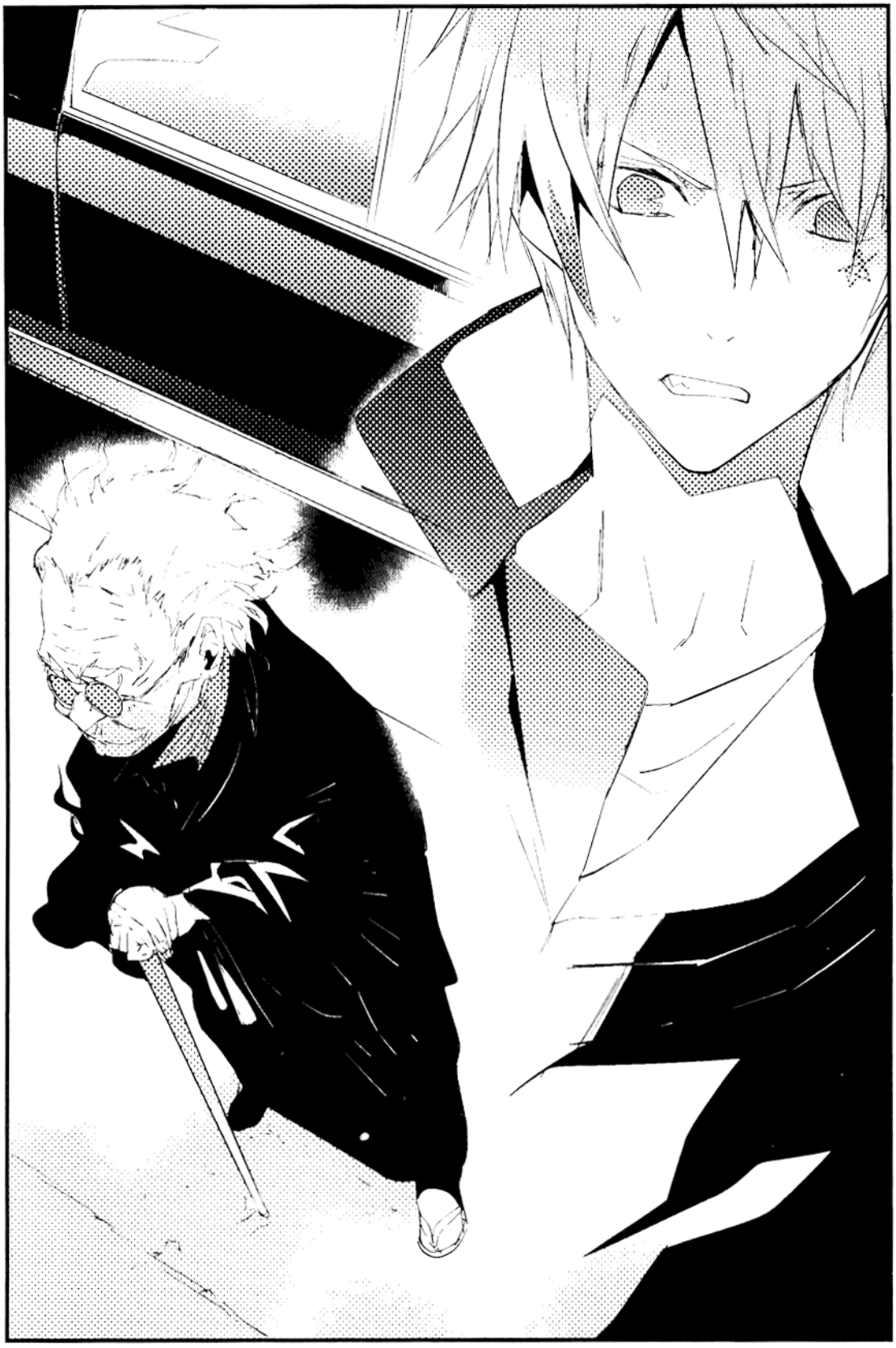
Harutora's hair stood on end over his whole body.

...It was! ......N-No, but..... How could this be!

A high-class sedan was calmly stopped in front of the academy building. He had seen it before. He couldn't possibly forget. His neck was extremely stiff as he looked downwards. He couldn't move his gaze.

A moment later, an old man wearing a black kimono dismounted from the backseat of the black sedan. He had already undoubtedly confirmed it.

"......Ashiya Doman....."



After noticing Harutora's demeanor, Natsume who sat next to him went: "Eh?"

"Harutora?"

As she spoke, she unconsciously leaned her body forward. She followed Harutora's gaze outside the window - and was dumbstruck.

"Natsume-kun?"

"Eh? What's wrong?"

Right after, Tenma also noticed the expressions of the two and Kyouko suddenly stopped moving her chopsticks. Touji, who sat across from Harutora - also next to the window - also hastily looked in the direction the two of them stared in.

Immediately after, his body went stiff.

"...That man! He's from that time!"

"Hah? What's up with you guys all of a sudden. Did someone famous arrive?"

Suzuka asked blankly but didn't get Touji's attention.

Harutora and Natsume were the same. They still stared out the window:

"The man from the Nue incident, the old man who sat in a black sedan and called himself Ashiya Doman."

Suzuka, Kyouko, and Tenma froze instantly.

Then, they stood up from their chairs like springs and rushed to the window by Harutora and the others to look.

Suzuka's expression changed:

"Hey, wait! Isn't that the person you mentioned before? 'D'!"

"It's him."

"No mistake?"

"......I can't see clearly from here, so I can't say....."

As he narrowed his eyes and looked downwards, Touji cautiously murmured vague words.

But,

...No.

Harutora was extremely sure that it was the old man from that time.

Tenma's face became distressed.

"B-But, why? Why would that person come to the Onmyou Academy? Could he be the principal's acquaintance?"

"Idiot, how is that possible. Grandma also asked about Natsume's encounter with 'D', right? If he were an acquaintance....."

Wait, Kurahashi-san. Isn't that the principal's shikigami?"

Natsume's words interrupted Kyouko as she got mad at Tenma. Kyouko hastily looked towards the window again.

The kimono-wearing old man had stopped the sedan in front of the entrance, without any intent of walking up the stairs. Upon careful observation, there was a small figure on the stairs.

A cat.

The principal indeed had a calico cat shikigami.

"Grandma?"

Kyouko exclaimed in surprise. In the next moment, the old man used the staff in his hand - probably his walking stick - to knock the sedan behind him.

The trunk in the back of the vehicle suddenly opened.

Something like a black shadow spewed forth from the trunk. The torrent leaped into the air, seeming to climb up the wall of the academy building. Harutora and the other were taken aback, shouting and turning away from the window.

"Harutora-sama!"

Along with the high-pitched voice, Kon materialized between Harutora and the window.

Then, right before them - the black color rapidly flowed past them, less than one meter from the window. Kyouko, screamed upon seeing the incoming torrent, and Harutora couldn't help but have such impulses.

"M-Monster--?"

"It's a shikigami!"

Natsume shouted to interrupt Harutora's words. The torrent crashed against itself, aggregating and compacting, forming a group of monsters.

Individual differences could still be seen amidst the high-speed movement, but overall it was just an all-black exterior. It wasn't completely black, as it had a shallow depth, looking like an ink painting.

Only what seemed to be the location of its eyes showed a blood-red color.

Screams sounded from the tables behind them. The students in the cafeteria had probably noticed the abnormality outside. The screams overlapped, chairs were knocked over, utensils fell to the ground, and some people took out charms in their panic--

"Stop! We can't attack it!"

Natsume immediately stopped them out loud. The students who had taken out charms immediately stopped moving.

"The academy barrier is already active. If we attack from the inside right now, it'll just harm the barrier!"

Natsume's analysis made all of the students present regain their calm. The students quickly focused their attention outside the window - on the movement of the shikigami.

In this period of time, the crowded shikigami outside the window changed its actions. After climbing straight upwards, it freed itself from its compressed state, and various parts began moving on their own. They couldn't see everything from the cafeteria windows, but in any case, it seemed like it planned on surrounding the entire academy building.

But,

"......It seems like those monsters really can't enter."

At the same time as Touji took a counterattacking stance, he still calmly observed the shikigami. Natsume nodded her head in approval.

"The academy barrier is quite high-level and it was even strengthened recently. It can't possibly be destroyed easily."

"......But, if this has to do with 'D', it won't be so easy for us, right?"

Suzuka warned them, her gaze still lingering outside the window. A fearless smile had emerged on her face, but her expression was very stiff.

"After all, the opponent is an Onmyouji that the Mystical Investigators couldn't catch no matter what they did. What's more, as you said, he even played with Kogure and Kagami in the palm of his hand, right? His abilities definitely aren't limited to using this kind of shikigami. I don't know how strong this barrier is, but the opponent definitely has other cards up his sleeve."

Though her qualifications had been suspended indefinitely, Suzuka was still a current National First-Class Onmyouji. The words she said incited a sense of crisis in the area.

Most importantly, Doman had unexpectedly intruded blatantly in broad daylight. If nothing else, this showed his self-confidence.

"Bastard. What exactly is going on?"

"Who knows!"

"The Onmyou Agency was attacked too, right?"

"Could it be related to this incident?"

As expected of Onmyou Academy students, the witnesses of such an abnormal situation still hadn't fallen into chaos. But, these questions clearly didn't have an answer, hence it could be seen that they were all trying to avert their gaze as much as possible and remain calm. Among the first-year students, quite a few people were already on their knees crying, and some people had begun scrambling to escape the cafeteria.

"H-Harutora-sama. Your orders, please!"

"Wait for now. Don't act rashly, Kon."

After issuing his order to his shikigami, Harutora grit his teeth. He didn't know what to do either.

For now, he reached out to grasp the shakujou standing nearby. His anxiety would swell rapidly if he didn't have a weapon in his hands.

...Bastard. What was his goal exactly? Could it be.....

Harutora glanced next to him at Natsume with his peripheral vision. Natsume's face was pale as she watched the activity outside the window.

"Th, The teachers should have noticed, right?"

It was none other than Tenma who spoke. He desperately controlled his emotions and spoke steadily.

Right as the words left Tenma's mouth, several teachers rushed into the cafeteria. Relieved expressions slightly flashed over the faces of the tense students.

"Can everyone hear? Unknown Onmyouji are currently attacking the Onmyou Academy!"

"We are beginning to evacuate immediately! All students, quickly move to the magic practice field. It's alright, there is a barrier protecting the Onmyou Academy! Everyone remain calm, do not panic, and act in an orderly fashion!"

The teachers acted while keeping calm with unusual expressions. Their change in attitude starting from this morning and the strengthening of the academy barrier was all because Doman's attack on the Onmyou Academy had been predicted.

Harutora swallowed.

"Moving to the magic practice field - we can't escape outside?"

"Outside is already surrounded by the shikigami, we can't escape."

After Touji spoke, Kyouko murmured an "I see".

"I guess they want to take refuge in the practice field barrier. Indeed, if it were that place--"

The academy building's barrier was enough to ensure that the students had time to evacuate. If they won the time to escape to the magic practice field, they could prepare a plan.

"B, But, doesn't this mean we'll be trapped inside?"

"Glasses-kun, you're too panicked. They'll definitely contact the Onmyou Agency and Exorcist Bureau immediately. The strategy now is to sit it out and wait for assistance."

"Well, it seems like they've suffered other attacks. What a busy time."

The teachers guided the students and simultaneously ran to other classrooms. The students who had already witnessed the shikigami followed orders without a word. In particular, the third-year students shouted to encourage the younger students while thoroughly implementing the teachers' orders.

"L, Let's go quickly!"

"......Yeah. If we can't escape, that's indeed the safest place."

Tenma and Kyouko urged the other four.

Touji didn't argue. He seemed to want to continue watching the situation, but the current situation was overly dangerous. If he disrupted their collective actions, it might lead to irreversible defeat. Even Suzuka reluctantly looked away from the window, following obediently behind Kyouko.

But,

"......Wait. I can't go."

Natsume said. Under Harutora's stunned gaze, Natsume closed her eyes and bit her lip with a pale face.

"Hey, Natsume?"

"......I can't. If I take refuge in the same place as everyone, that place will probably become the target."

After saying this, Natsume looked at Harutora with an expression full of faith.

"Think about it. It's not just the Onmyou Academy that's being attacked right now, the Onmyou Agency is too. There can't possibly be no relationship when the Onmyou Academy and Onmyou Agency get attacked at the same time. Rather than it being 'the same culprit', it seems more reasonable that it's 'multiple culprits'."

"Wh, What are you trying to say?"

"You don't understand? Ashiya Doman - the Onmyouji known as 'D' - is known to have connections with the Twin-Horned Syndicate, right? So this attack might well be the because of the Twin-Horned Syndicate - the work of Yakou fanatics. In that case....."

"I'm the target," Natsume said with a hoarse voice.

What Natsume said was indeed reasonable. If Natsume's speculation was true, her taking refuge in the same place as other students would probably implicate others. Not long before, Harutora had just comforted her to not worry herself, but it was hard to immediately deny Natsume's current worries.

"Wait, Natsume-kun. Didn't Touji say just now? If you were the enemies' target, my grandma would have warned you directly."

"No, Kurahashi-san. I'm happy that you're comforting me like that, but the principal might not have been able to see through Ashiya Doman's true intentions. As long as the probability isn't zero, I shouldn't assume the best. I can't put everyone in danger."

Natsume clearly asserted this to Kyouko, who still wanted to persuade her.

Natsume's current absolutely unyielding will could be seen just from her expression. Kyouko couldn't continue saying anything.

Touji smiled and Suzuka hmphed.

Harutora had already made his decision in the first place.

".....Understood. We'll respect Natsume's opinion. But - Natsume, I won't let you say anything like escaping alone."

Harutora announced in an unyielding tone. Natsume looked at Harutora, then looked at Touji, Kyouko and Tenma, her gaze finally falling on Suzuka.

Touji didn't say anything - as he had been up through now.

Kyouko nodded, her expression conveying 'that's obvious at this point'.

Tenma's face was ashen, but he still didn't plan on avoiding Natsume's gaze.

Suzuka glanced at Natsume out of the corner of her eye:

"......Whatever."

And spoke indifferently.

On the surface, Suzuka's expression was ice-cold and her tone was callous. But, the four people other than Natsume and Suzuka unconsciously smiled, looking at each other and thinking 'even at this time, she still.....'.

"Yes, yes. Even if you took refuge with everyone, you wouldn't have anyone to talk to."

"What!? What are you joking about, you idiot! It's the opposite! If I took refuge with trash at a time like this, their sobbing would make me really depressed!"

"If the fact that your magical energy was sealed got exposed, your image as a Divine General would run into trouble."

"Shut up, headband! I can get rid of this kind of shitty shikigami without getting serious!"

Suzuka roared angrily, her face suddenly reddening. Her feigned manner was thus ruined.

But,

"......Thank you."

The red-faced Suzuka suddenly became speechless and flustered upon hearing Natsume's serious thanks. "W-Well, it's not....." In the end, she didn't spit the abuse she was so good at, her words also becoming vague. Then,

"...Hmph."

She looked in a different direction.

In Harutora's eyes, she was definitely being difficult. Even so, Harutora still unconsciously patted her head, thanking her for her aid in an urgent situation. The situation Touji had depicted had finally become reality.

...Yes. It's not just Natsume and I. We have these comrades now, so there's no need to be scared.

Harutora glanced at Touji and Touji raised the corner of his mouth slightly.

There were no students to be seen in the cafeteria. Only Harutora's group of six was left here.

Touji looked at everyone's face:

"Alright. First, let's leave this place. Then, let's communicate with the teachers that we intend to take different actions. Though we can't contact the principal..... Kyouko, fly a communication simple shikigami to the magic practice field--"

"Harutora-sama!"

Kon cried out.

The six of them suddenly shivered. In the next moment, a faint shadow was cast around them along with a huge sound.

Harutora turned around, staring blankly. A shikigami was outside the window next to them.

Its body was no longer than a meter, and one couldn't help but associate its hair-covered limbs with those of a ghoul living in hell. Moreover, crow-like wings grew from its back and it had a snakelike tail. But, the most eye-catching part was its head. It was huge to an unnatural level, with a very ugly face like an anthropomorphic turtle.

Its deformed posture resembled a theatrical monster, with a malicious humor showing in its ferocity.

Probably because the shikigami was touching the barrier, its body was covered in intense 'lag'. Interference spread through its body, but it still had no intention of leaving, hitting the glass with its face instead. Its crimson eyes rolled to stare at Harutora and the others who were inside the academy.

Kon's tail bristled and she drew her beloved blade Kachiwari. Harutora also unconsciously raised the shakujou at the shikigami.

The shikigami opened its mouth.

Then:

"Oh. So this is where you were. This is the first time we've met like this after the Nue incident."

It spoke human language.

This vibrant, almost mocking voice was familiar. It was the voice from the old man that night - the voice of Ashiya Doman that had come from the sedan.

"It's you.....!"

"Hohoho. Sorry for making such a big disturbance this time. I said I was eagerly waiting, but in the end it was this old man who came to bother you, breaking our original promise. Forgive me."

"You really are the old man from that time! Why did you come here?"

Harutora roared angrily back at the shikigami. But, his knees trembled intensely right after he finished speaking.

In comparison, Doman's shikigami emitted a cheerful laugh.

"Just a small matter. I already cleared it up with the principal just now. I'll leave immediately after my business. Don't mind other people's business, children. This incident is also a bit unusual for me."

The shikigami's tone was extremely relaxed, forming a clear opposite to Harutora, whose entire body trembled in his stance. The shikigami suddenly twisted its neck, its vision swiveling towards midair. "......Ah."

It was an extremely human movement, which made it all the more terrifying.

Then:

"......A rare opportunity. Should I have fun with you too for a few moments?"

He coldly laughed.

In Harutora and the others' point of view, the current scene was as if a tiger, baboon, or even a dinosaur that understood human language had showed them a hideous smile covered in saliva, which moreover unconsciously released an evil air. Even their skin cells were trembling, and they were close to losing consciousness.

"Don't let him scare you!"

Touji encouraged everyone, but his own expression was extremely stiff.

Across from the barrier and even with the shikigami as a medium, a certain feeling was still conveyed to their hearts.

...The hard-to-describe terror of Ashiya Doman.

Kyouko endured the brunt of the terror, straightening her back:

"Th-The academy's barrier will protect us! Grandma's preparations should be flawless. Moreover, several professional Onmyouji will be coming to help from the Onmyou Agency and the Exorcist Bureau. Of course, there will be Divine Generals. I don't know if you're the real Ashiya Doman, but you can't win!"

Kyouko's trembling voice showed an impressive courage, making Harutora relocate his strength from his beaten-down emotions. He had this kind of friend to be proud of. He grasped the shakujou in his hand.

But, Doman was unconcerned about Kyouko's full-force resistance.

"That's quite bad. You would be concerned if this old man came to visit without bringing any gifts at all, right? That would no longer be a problem of 'etiquette', it would be simple ignorance. This old man wouldn't do anything so boring. Being able to scare everyone once in a while is enough to let this old man feel meaning in living."

The shikigami smiled lightly again, its body bending back from the windows.

Then, it used its head to strike the glass again. Its body was burned by the barrier.

"Moreover..... When I looked for the person to deliver the gift, I especially chose someone around the Tsuchimikados. It looks like that person is also looking forward to this old man's mischief. Rejoice, rejoice. Then, as you insist, here is my duty as a 'jester'."

Harutora and the others breathed deeply upon hearing Doman's monologue. Though they didn't understand the meaning in his words, they had a kind of bad premonition.

The shikigami was still smiling.

Then:

"They all do it like this these days. ...Order!"

A scream sounded right as the words left his mouth.

It was Tenma.

Harutora looked back. A beam of light shot from Tenma's uniform - from his pocket, penetrating the fabric and turning into the light source, a small piece of paper that flew into the air.

It was a charm.

"...! Get down!"

After Touji shouted, Harutora and the others hastily threw themselves to the floor. A moment later, a strong magical energy exploded over their heads. As Harutora lay prone, he 'saw' it. It wasn't very complex, to the point where it could be called a simple magic. It passed through the walls and floor, scattering in all directions.

The magic stopped at the surrounding barrier, beginning a magic that eroded the barrier. The surrounding barrier gradually dissolved. Then, a sound of something hard shattering rang out and the air outside blew over their head.

Glass shards flew everywhere. The sounds of their landing came from above the heads that they protected with their arms.

"...How is it? Most barriers are only tough on the outside but easy to destroy from the inside. No matter whether it's an ancient magic or a recent magic."

The elated voice was no longer across the window. Kon rapidly jumped into the air to protect Harutora. Harutora still couldn't stand up for the moment, raising his head while kneeling on the floor.

The shikigami fanned its wings near the ceiling of the cafeteria, gazing at Harutora and the others.

"......Th-The barrier..."

"How is that possible.....!"

Kyouko and Natsume moaned. "Bastard!" Suzuka cursed loudly upon seeing the unfavorable situation before her. Touji, who had quickly risen, solemnly checked the surrounding damage.

Tenma was already no longer able to speak.

The sound of shattering glass was audible from every direction. Perhaps this was the same everywhere in the academy.

The barrier had been broken.

Doman's shikigami had infiltrated the academy.

Harutora hastily stood up, his brain still in a state of terror. He lifted the shakujou next to Kon, raising his head towards the shikigami wheeling above him.

Black feathers dropped from the shikigami's body, as if to proclaim:

'Come, prepare to leave the nest.'

Part 3

An innumerable amount of simple shikigami attacked the Onmyou Agency building. At the same time, they also confirmed several servant shikigami, each one seeming to possess quite a high level of spiritual power. It could be considered as an outstanding fighting force with the Onmyou Agency as its opponent.

Amami, who was designated the commander, arranged a defensive stronghold with the building's barrier as its center, ordering that they stick to the basics and repel the shikigami. The enemies' numbers were more than planned for, but the personnel deployed beforehand were still enough to cope. The problem was the high-level servant shikigami. Considering how to rationally use their fighting power resources, Amami separated out four Independent Exorcists and subordinate units to go deal with them, becoming servant shikigami strike teams that left the building to attack.

But, Kagami who received this order began a separate search operation.

It was just cumbersome to bring subordinates to the battlefield that couldn't act as human shields for himself. Even if they could be useful for dealing with traps, he could use his own shikigami instead when the time came. After all, Kagami had originally taken the subordinates to be the higher-ups' supervisors to watch over him and he felt annoyed just by looking at them.

".....In the end, the opponent is the old man from back then. I can't bring that group of trash."

Kagami and Kogure were the same. They had both confirmed 'D's existence first-hand.

They definitely couldn't forget that world. After the Onmyou Academy students had defeated the Nue, turning a certain crossroads into a battlefield, a magic that Kagami had never seen nor heard of before formed a barrier that fully encircled the entire area. Even with his, Kogure's, and Ohtomo's efforts, they had only been able to break the barrier at the very end. Three National First-Class Onmyouji.

Also, the aura he had exposed before leaving had been quite unusual. Whether he was the original Ashiya Doman or not, 'D' undoubtedly possessed a strong power, enough to match an Independent Exorcist like Kagami. What's more, it had already been very long - actually, extremely long - since he had an intense magical battle.

But 'D's location still hadn't been confirmed. He had just sent a large number of shikigami. Judging from this, he himself seemed to be focusing on controlling the shikigami, so he wouldn't come to the frontlines. If his attack ended in defeat, he could also escape without exposing himself. "I won't let him get what he wants." Kagami's eyes flashed strangely.

First were the servant shikigami. Putting aside the simple shikigami for now, the aura connection between servant shikigami and their master couldn't be hidden easily. If he could suppress the servant shikigami, he could probably fiddle with it and find the location of the master.

According to the reports, the enemy's servant shikigami hadn't yet been analyzed, but it seemed that several had been confirmed that were similar to Type-Ogres - in other words, oni. Actually, Kagami had vaguely noticed the enemy letting off a weak demonic aura before. He originally hadn't planned on being choosy, but if the enemy - if 'D' was using oni, his nickname of 'Ogre Eater' was already crying out in excitement.

"Heh, heh, heh....."

As he ran on the moonlight road, Kagami's mouth showed a violent smile.

Then, the sword bag in his hands constantly shook as if it were possessed.

There was a katana placed in the sword bag, the famous sword Onikiri that had cut off the arm of a certain oni in ancient times. At the same time, it was the vessel of Shaver, the shikigami Kagami used.

Sincerely speaking, Kagami hoped 'D' could be a bit honest. Though Shaver was Kagami's shikigami, he had been taken away from his master because it wasn't necessary for him to take the stage in normal work. Now, Kagami had only received permission to use him to deal with 'D', and he had been returned to Kagami's hands.

If they dealt with 'D' in this operation, the Onmyou Agency would definitely take Shaver back again. The current Kagami didn't have the permissions or rights to stop them either. Since he didn't have the power, he could only obey.

Though Kagami was a stereotypical faithless bastard, he would inadvertently feel some sort of respect for someone whose strength overpowered his own, whether it was in magical energy, intellectuality, or even authority. For example, regarding his boss Miyachi, his senpai Kogure, or the Onmyou Agency organization, Kagami held pure admiration for their 'strength' completely unrelated with their personalities or ways of organization. That was undoubtedly the only reason he officially belonged to the Onmyou Agency.

In any case, if the battle ended here, the possibility that Shaver would be stolen away again was extremely high. In that case, he needed to use this 'strength' as much as possible and savor some refreshment. It was a waste of energy no matter how many simple shikigami he smashed, but as for the ancient, strong servant shikigami..... Or even the mystery-filled 'D' himself..... There was only a meaning in wielding strength if he faced strong opponents.

Then, after this kind of battle, his strength would also increase. Familiarity with techniques, and study of battle would become his own flesh and blood.

He would consume his enemy - the oni.

"......I won't let you run away....."

Kagami himself probably hadn't noticed, but he was extremely 'ambitious' in a sense - even greedy to an abnormal degree. Moreover, it was this greed that sustained Kagami's strength.

Kagami's hunt still continued. Putting the Onmyou Agency work to the side, he single-mindedly headed towards the servant shikigami - pursuing in the direction from which he felt a weak demonic aura.

But the battle-hardened Kagami immediately noticed something strange.

"......It's a bit strange."

The enemy - the reactions of the hunted servant shikigami were slow. They didn't seem to be escaping, nor did they have any intention of fighting. Under normal circumstances, Kagami wouldn't feel doubt about such a reaction from an enemy, but this time was different. The current enemy was attacking the Onmyou Agency to steal the 'Raven's Wing'. Hence, why didn't they seem to want to attack?

Kagami stopped moving. Then, the demonic aura he had been chasing just now also stopped moving.

...Could it be that the enemy's goal was to lure me far away from the Onmyou Agency building?

Luring away an Independent Exorcist that was an important fighting force of the Onmyou Agency, hence weakening the defensive power of the headquarters. So that's what was going on, 'D' was using a common, effective strategy.

But even so, he was still a bit concerned about some things. If 'D' truly wanted to destroy the Onmyou Agency building's barrier, gathering hundreds of simple shikigami had no meaning at all. The Onmyou Agency building's barrier was undoubtedly the best such building-size magic in the nation. Letting a small

number of strong shikigami gather somewhere and attack a single point might have hope.

Or did 'D' have the means to destroy the barrier alone? Supposing so, it would be more effective for him to destroy the barrier as soon as possible and let the shikigami rush inside to create havoc. Never mind Kagami for now, the other of the Twelve Divine Generals would have trouble using strong magic out of concern for surrounding damage if they were mixed in with normal exorcists and workers. Even if Amami was using the barrier as a stronghold, strong magic could only be used 'outdoors'.

"......What is his goal, exactly."

Not moving, Kagami furrowed his brows and muttered quietly. The sword bag in his hands shook urgently, but Kagami didn't care.

Just then, Kagami's phone received a call from Miyachi. He immediately picked up the phone.

"Kagami. Let me ask, are you moving with Kogure right now?"

An unexpected question stunned Kagami.

"Hah? I'm alone. Did Kogure die?"

"No, how's that possible. I was just asking."

Miyachi laughed, speaking vaguely. Kagami clicked his tongue anxiously. That serious Kogure annoyed him, and this foxy boss - his 'strength' was another matter - also really pissed him off.

But, Kagami's anxiety immediately turned to a different direction.

"Well, it's nothing. Come back to the building. The shikigami you're chasing probably won't stop you."

After hearing Miyachi's instructions, Kagami couldn't help but doubt his own ears. Not comprehending, he wanted to roar back angrily--

"Actually, the Onmyou Academy in Shibuya is being attacked right now too. Moreover, an Onmyouji whose appearance is similar to 'D' has been confirmed. Chief Amami judged that the attack against the Agency is a decoy, and redid the deployment."

After hearing Miyachi's words, Kagami stood still, speechless.

...The Onmyou Academy?

Moreover, they had confirmed 'D' was there.

He couldn't understand why 'D' would attack the Onmyou Academy. But the reason didn't matter at all. What was important was the fact itself that 'D' had attacked the Onmyou Academy.

The 'D' that had made him caper not long ago wasn't at the Onmyou Agency, but had appeared in the Onmyou Academy instead. More importantly, Ohtomo was also at the Onmyou Academy. 'D' and Ohtomo, two prey that Kagami wanted to capture himself - 'demons' with powerful abilities. It was because he wanted to meet those two that he had been baited by the servant shikigami acting as a trap.

"Come back immediately."

After saying this, Miyachi hung up the phone.

Kagami's body trembled for a moment.

"...Bastard!"

He hurled the phone onto the ground.

...Could he catch up if he used Far Step[9]?

Far step was a high-level magic of Imperial Onmyoudou. One could enter the aura flow and perform long-distance movement. But his current location was too far from Shibuya. Such a large-scale decoy had been used to make the Onmyou Agency focus its fighting power on the headquarters. The enemy had definitely

fully considered countermeasures to magic that could render the decoy useless - magic like Far Step.

The most convenient method would be to set a trap in the aura flow. Confirming whether there was a trap would waste valuable time.

"Bastard! Bastard!"

Kagami tore off his sunglasses, staring at the distant Shibuya.

".....Ohtomo. If you die, I'll never forgive you....."

He ground his teeth and spat those words. Even as a joke, this was the first time Kagami prayed for the safety of his former colleague.

Chapter 4 - Breaking Through the Enemy Line

Part 1

Like ants swarming on candy.

The black group of shikigami began eroding away at the Onmyou Academy building.

The barrier covering the academy hadn't completely disappeared yet, but it had already lost the majority of its function, and the shikigami would only receive 'lag' effects if they touched it. Many shikigami broke through the glass, infiltrating the interior of the academy one by one.

The sound of shattering glass, the strange noise of the flying shikigami, and the screams of students resounded through the whole building.

".....What is this....."

The principal's shikigami breathed.

The only bet she had made was that the barrier would be able to maintain until assistance arrived, or at least win enough time for the students to take refuge underground. The ease with which the barrier had been broken completely exceeded her expectations.

"Then, excuse me."

Doman walked up the stairs after saying this. The cat came to its senses, retreating backwards nimbly.

The two automatic doors at the main entrance opened from the outside.

The cat stopped in front of the inner automatic doors, glaring at Doman with its fur bristling. The two komainu to its left and right guarded this small space between the two sets of automatic doors.

"...Release magic! Alpha, Omega! Stop him!"

Along with the principal's command, the two mechanical shikigami underwent 'lag'.

'Lag' was originally a phenomenon received by materialized shikigami when they received strong physical interference, causing their materialization to become 'unstable'. In this aspect, mechanical shikigami whose vessels were their actual forms didn't have a materialization process, and of course they were unassociated with the 'lag' phenomenon.

But, Alpha and Omega were different. As mechanical shikigami, they were usually in a state of 'mimicry'.

"...Our master."

"...As you command."

As if they had received image interference, the two komainus' bodies were covered by intense 'lag'.

Then, what appeared from the komainus' 'mimicry' were metal dogs formed with complex movable joints.

Their size was about enough to cover the 'mimicked' komainu. Then, they immediately stood up from their pedestals with a sound, their bodies extending almost twice as far as their komainu form. Their postures after transforming weren't like komainu, but more like steel Dobermans, filled with a lean, sturdy beauty.

A pentagram was etched into the forehead of their finely carved bodies. These were the true vessels of the two mechanical shikigami - Alpha and Omega.

Alpha and Omega bent their bodies, leaping off their pedestals.

The cat switched its place with the two shikigami, itself walking into the inner automatic doors.

In the next moment,

"...Ho, ho..."

Came Doman's laugh. Immediately after, a sudden, terrifying gale blew into the building from behind the old man's back.

The pitch-black gale was like a jet of ink, and it had a sense of weight that could be felt. It was more like the flow of a liquid than wind.

The outer automatic door was smashed and the inner automatic door was instantly shattered. Of course, even the calico cat couldn't resist, being swept up like a fallen leaf and tossed easily into the air.

In moments, the cat was blown to the first-floor stairway.

But Alpha and Omega wouldn't be so easily shaken.

They stood powerfully on their four limbs, enduring the pitch-black gale. Baring their teeth, they jumped into the wind to attack Doman.

"Oh."

Doman sighed joyfully. At the same time, two oni appeared in front of him.

The shikigami Doman released resembled black oni drawn in ink. These were Doman's defensive shikigami. The two oni blocked the charging mechanical shikigami with a crash, then hurled them towards the academy interior.

The thrown Alpha and Omega twisted their bodies in midair and dropped to the ground. In this moment, Doman's two oni moved forward, finally stepping into the academy building.

Watching Alpha and Omega with interest:

".....That form contains barrier magic inside. Similar to the 'Armored Juggernaut'. Could it be Yakou's work?"

The cat which had crashed into an inner wall stood up shakily, staring daggers at Doman.

Doman's conjecture was correct. Alpha and Omega were originally vessels Yakou had created, and later the principal had infused them with magical energy, ordering them to protect the Onmyou Academy. In short, the vessels were originally products of Imperial Onmyoudou.

"Hmph..... Well, considering the Onmyou Academy's predecessor, there's nothing unnatural about it."

Doman didn't wait for the principal's reply, murmuring knowingly to himself.

On the other hand, Alpha and Omega had each been confronted by one of the two black oni in the middle of the floor.

From their appearance, Doman's defensive shikigami weren't servant shikigami. They were probably his own creations. Their magical energy was much stronger than the shikigami that had been released from the sedan trunk. Doman had

deliberately set aside these as his guardians, and hence one could surmise the special significance of these two oni.

"Priest! I have already explained, the 'Raven's Wing' is not here!"

The principal cried out loudly. Doman just glanced at her without interest.

"This old man also explained that he would investigate as he wanted. There's no meaning in continuing to be noisy. Don't be an annoyance."

Doman's attitude made the cat's fur stand on end.

Just then:

"Principal!"

Four teachers hurried over from the second-floor staircase. They were teachers responsible for practical skills classes, and Fujiwara stood at the front of them. After seeing the terrible situation on the first floor and Doman along with the two oni, he unconsciously stopped his feet, holding his breath.

After quickly picking themselves up, Alpha and Omega moved over and the other three also followed behind Fujiwara.

"Stop them. I'll leave this area to you."

"......Leave it to us. I won't die here."

After a quiet conversation, the cat walked the other way towards the staircase. Doman didn't pursue the principal's shikigami, looking towards the newcomer Fujiwara and the others.

"......Ashiya Doman..... Priest Doman?"

Fujiwara checked with a tense face. "Indeed", Doman replied majestically.

While watching four teachers:

"You power looks average."

Speaking to Fujiwara:

"Though that is true, I can't see any specific degree. How will you welcome this old man?'

"......Though it will be difficult, we can't give up. Even if you visit so suddenly, our side has made the relevant preparations."

Fujiwara took out a charm and the other three also adopted various stances for magical battle.

But Doman turned to look in the direction of the stairs, unconcerned about the movements of Fujiwara and the others.

"That man--"

"What?"

"Where is the one-legged brat? Why hasn't that man come."

Fujiwara suddenly showed a surprised expression.

"......Are you interested?"

"Well....."

Doman took a short time to find the words to respond to Fujiwara's cautious question.

But:

"Well. After all, I have something to find."

Right after the words left his mouth, he slowly spread his arms for some reason. Fujiwara and the other immediately focused their concentration. Two of them had already begun chanting incantations.

Doman's speed was faster.

Doman flapped his sleeves. A large quantity of charms spilled forth from his short flapping kimono sleeves like a magic trick, making one unable to help but doubt his own eyes.

Before the charms fell to the ground, they quickly materialized in midair, their external appearance the same as the shikigami that had appeared from the trunk. The black shikigami formed a torrent, covering the floor in moments. They gradually advanced along the stairs to the upper level like an avalanche in the hallway.

"Ah!"

Fujiwara immediately spread a barrier to protect them. But in the time he took to cast, the shikigami had already grown significantly.

"You shall search for the 'Raven's Wing'. This old man... will have a bit of fun."

Part 2

Tenma's eyes widened in stupor and regret.

His gaze was fixed on something in midair - the place that the paper that had just flown out of Tenma's pocket had given off light. His face was drained of blood, his lips were tight, and he stared intently at the place.

As he was dumbstruck, the cafeteria's windows were shattered one by one, and black shikigami invaded from the outside one after another.

The shikigami let out hideous laughter, jumping back and forth. They jumped to the ground, pushed over tables, flew out of the cafeteria, and continued infiltrating the interior of the academy. It wasn't just here. This scene was probably also playing out in the various other rooms of the academy. The sound of students' screams came from all directions along with the shouts of teachers.

The barrier had been broken.

Moreover, what had broken it was--

"Get up!"

Touji roared. Tenma shrank back in fright.

The shikigami that had just spoken had suddenly descended from around the ceiling, its target Harutora.

"Knave!"

Kon shouted. She released fireballs at the shikigami approaching Harutora.

Kon's fox fire hit its head. The shikigami wailed, thrashing in midair. Its upper body burned, and every time it flapped its wings, sparks scattered towards the surroundings. Using this time, Harutora quickly condensed his aura.

He infusing his magical energy into the shakujou. The rings on the front of the shakujou began spinning rapidly.

"Take this!"

He stabbed outwards.

Lag appeared over the shikigami's entire body, and it flashed unstably, finally exploding loudly. Afterwards, all that was left was a scorched charm floating down to the ground.

"...W, We did it!"

"No! There are still a lot. Everyone, leave the windows and form a circle!"

The black shikigami still invaded the cafeteria. Listening to Touji's instructions, Harutora, Natsume, Kyouko, and Suzuka immediately complied.

But,

"Tenma, what are you doing!"

Kyouko cried.

Tenma didn't move.

His mind was blank. He couldn't understand the situation just now. No, his mind refused to understand.

"Tenma! Get back!"

Harutora shouted, his face pale. The sound of shattering glass came from behind him a gain and he unconsciously looked back. A black shikigami broke the window and descended behind Tenma's back.

Its extremely hideous exterior was like a monster from a nightmare. But Tenma's mind was still paralyzed and he couldn't react for a while.

"Hakuou!"

Kyouko called forth her defensive shikigami. This shikigami resembled a knight clad in white armor. It was a 'Model G2 Yaksha' created by the Onmyou Agency.

Hakuou materialized in front of the shikigami about to crush Tenma, hitting it with its equipped katana by a hair's breadth. The cut shikigami showed lag and stopped moving. In this time, Kyouko rushed to Tenma, grabbing his arms and forcefully pulling him up.

"Idiot! What are you spacing out for! Snap out of it!"

The shikigami that had been cut by Hakuou let out an angry bellow, pulling away from the Yaksha. But it didn't show any signs of fleeing. It flew above a table and bared its fangs and teeth, threatening Hakuou - and the six students. Kyouko summoned her other defensive shikigami Kokfuu, which raised its spear next to Hakuou.

Harutora and the others adjusted their positions, adding Tenma and Kyouko into the circle.

"Tenma-kun, are you hurt?"

"Be careful, Tenma! This is a real battle right now!"

Natsume quickly checked Tenma's condition and Harutora kept watch over the surroundings while anxiously scolding Tenma. After hearing the words of the two people worried about him, Tenma's brain finally regained its function.

With his arm still being grabbed by Kyouko,

"......Sorry."

He spoke words of apology.

"Sorry, I'm really sorry. It was all my fault that....."

Tenma muttered with a pale face, unable to face up to Harutora and the others.

The reason the academy's barrier had been destroyed was extremely clear. Tenma had unknowingly brought Doman's charm - that small piece of paper - into the barrier. Just as Doman said, barriers were basically all used to stop enemies entering from the outside, and they couldn't endure an attack from the inside. The barrier the Onmyou Academy had prepared to deal with Doman had been completely demolished by Tenma's mistake.

The outcome he had brought was the situation before him.

"What should I do. It was all my fault..... I never knew anything. Sorry. I, I....."

The other five people had also noticed the reason the barrier had been broken. Kyouko let go, murmuring "Tenma.....". The sympathy audible in her voice pricked Tenma's chest like a needle.

His shame and self-disgust had reached a level where he wanted to die. It assaulted him like a tsunami.

In order to help everyone, or at least to not become a burden, he had desperately worked hard up to now, but in the end he had ended up here with no way of turning things around. It wouldn't help no matter how much he apologized and regretted.

He had let the enemy invade the Onmyou Academy.

If this went on, there would definitely be injuries and deaths among the teachers and students. But Tenma didn't have the strength to stop this situation from occurring.

"......Sorry."

Apologizing couldn't resolve the problem, but he had to apologize. Tenma continuously repeated himself as if he were talking in his sleep.

But:

"Hah? What's up with you?"

Suzuka suddenly scowled and scolded him ferociously. "...Eh? Tenma unconsciously raised his head.

Suzuka didn't hide her anxious feelings, glaring sharply at the surrounding shikigami while glancing at Tenma:

"Tricks like hiding a charm to destroy a barrier from the inside are the oldest tricks in the book. It was just coincidence that you were chosen as the pawn. No, it was because you were related to this guy that he set the trap, right? This guy's his target. You just come along with him. Frankly, you're too self-conscious!"

"That....."

Her words were indeed reasonable. The enemy wouldn't possible target a small fry like him. Doman had also mentioned that he had 'specifically chosen someone near the Tsuchimikados'.

But he had been chosen as the target of the trap because he was the weakest link in Harutora's group. Tenma was somewhat self-conscious, but he still hadn't left Harutora and the others. It was proof that he didn't have strength - that he was naive. He was useless, nor did he have any talent.

But:

"The opponent's 'D', right? I already said many times, he's so powerful that the Mystical Investigators were shocked. Someone of your level couldn't possible cope if he eyed you. So what exactly are you thinking? What remorse, you're just acting disappointed and way too arrogant. Enough, glasses, hurry up and pull back so that you don't impede us!"

Suzuka's words were merciless. But because of this, the words clearly didn't have any deliberate sympathy or consolation. Her unconcealed rough tone blew away all of Tenma's gloom.

Touji smiled upon seeing the speechless Tenma.

".....A point for Dairenji, huh. Indeed, there aren't many people who would notice if Ashiya Doman were playing around with them. At least I don't have that kind of confidence."

"Yeah. It's like Dairenji and Touji said. Everyone's the same for not having seen through the trap. Alpha and Omega's inspections today morning were even more detailed than usual, but in the end they weren't able to notice the charm. This isn't the fault of Tenma alone. Though it's regretful, the opponents' skills are on another level."

"Really. In the end, it's always Natsume and I who trouble everyone. But you never hated us and you still get along with us fine, right? Isn't that right, Tenma."

Touji, Natsume, and Harutora consoled Tenma.

Harutora continued speaking.

"After all, we're just students. No one's mature yet, and that's why there's meaning in working together. Isn't that right?"

".....Harutora-kun."

His companions' words flowed into his heart. Finally, Kyouko patted Tenma's shoulder.

"Have you heard this? Save regret and despair for afterwards. Right now isn't the place for those, right?"

"Yeah, I agree completely with Kyouko's opinion."

Touji replied while surveying the surroundings.

Now, there were already more than ten black shikigami that had invaded the cafeteria and that had probably chosen Harutora and the others as targets. They didn't charge to other rooms, instead circling around them.

Harutora raised his shakujou again, and Kon turned the blade of her wakizashi outwards in front of Harutora. Kyouko had Hakuou and Kokfuu advance forwards a step, and Natsume, Touji, and Suzuka all showed serious, fearless expressions as they confronted Doman's shikigami.

Complying with Touji's plan, Harutora and the others put their backs to each other, forming a ring facing the surrounding shikigami. Tenma felt that even if he were added to the group, he couldn't raise their overall battle power.

But,

"Sorry..... Thanks."

Tenma walked in between Harutora and Kyouko, turning around and entrusting his back to his companions.

The black shikigami shrank their enclosure. Their numbers had now increased to almost twenty.

One of them met his gaze. The shikigami's crimson eyes rounded, its teeth gnashing audibly as it emitted a hideous laugh. It drooled as it pranced around mockingly.

He probably couldn't defeat that shikigami. He probably couldn't do it himself, whether it was driving away the enemy or guarding against the opponents' attacks.

But at the least, he wasn't scared anymore.

His breathing was as difficult as if he had been buried in sand, and his chest was filled with a huge feeling of powerlessness and remorse. Still, Tenma made every effort to focus completely on dealing with the battle before him.

Suzuka glanced at Tenma again, checking that the six were all able to act.

"......Well?"

☆

"What do we do now? It's fine if we defeat every single one of them."

Suzuka checked the collective opinions of everyone by way of a question.

Then,

"Natsume, you decide."

Touji said decisively. Natsume stared at Touji over her shoulder with an "eh".

Touji didn't turn around.

"Among everyone, you're the key person. We'll trust your judgment. Dairenji, you don't mind, right?"

"......Hmph. I'll leave myself if I'm unhappy. You and I are different, I'm fine even by myself."

"I see. You're going to fight alone against this group of shikigami? Quite a miserable scene, even if you won't lose."

"Hey! You've been wanting too much since just now, headband! Why were my words twisted like that!"

"It's alright, Suzuka-chan. No one would leave Suzuka-chan out."

"What do you mean, leaving out! I wasn't your companion in the first place! What's more, you're really looking down on a Divine General! I'm really strong! One of only a dozen in the nation!"

Suzuka declared again angrily. The other five could only sigh again.

...In some sense, this was also an ability.

Harutora thought happily. Though Suzuka herself wouldn't be willing, teasing her like this probably wasn't a problem. Even if they were surrounded by Ashiya Doman's shikigami without a way of turning the tables like now.

"Natsume, it's up to you."

Harutora also gave the decision-making responsibility to Natsume.

Natsume thought for a moment, then:

"......At least Ashiya Doman said once that he wouldn't harm other students. Anyway, it's fine if we just worry about ourselves."

After hearing Natsume's serious remark, Touji immediately made a joke. "Well, we don't the time to worry about others anyway." In the enemy's proclamation just now, only Harutora's group had clearly been 'designated as a target'. For the time being, they could only focus on protecting themselves and finding a teacher for possible assistance.

".....But, it's hard to contend with 'D' with just us. The barrier was broken, so basically all we can do is wait for the Onmyou Agency's assistance."

"Understood. So do we wait it out? Or do we just escape outside the academy altogether?"

Natsume replied cautiously to Harutora's question.

"In the current situation, we can't possibly escape without being noticed by the enemy. If we are noticed, he might pursue us outside the academy, and then the street outside will be damaged. We have to avoid that kind of situation."

"Then it's decided, we'll hold fast."

Touji nodded his head in understanding.

"It'll probably become a protracted battle, but we can't escape underground to the magic practice field, so--"

".....A, Are there other empty practical training rooms? Practical training rooms all have barriers, though they aren't as strong as the magic practice field. We should have more of a chance if we go take refuge there."

It was Tenma who mentioned this plan. Natsume immediately adopted Tenma's opinion.

"The enemy's numbers are very large. We can't exhaust ourselves to fight them one by one."

"Right. Our charms also have limits."

"Yeah. We should escape to a practical training room's barrier and conserve our power. If the barrier is broken, we'll move to a different practical training room. We'll control our exhaustion as much as possible and continuously win small amounts of time."

Kyouko also nodded approval to Natsume's strategy.

"Understood. Then, closest to here is - the eighth practical training room."

"Well, before that, we have to break out of here."

Touji smiled slightly.

At some point in time, the number of shikigami surrounding Harutora and the others had already grown to an innumerable level.

The shikigamis' forms were all different, but overall their forms were similar, just like a 'shikigami group'. They didn't look like modern spiritual disasters, but rather like the Heian period Hyakki Yagyou that made trouble during the night.

Natsume breathed deeply again.

"......Everyone, ready? Let's start moving slowly. Make sure not to leave your companions, and maintain the circle."

"Okay, Natsume. Anyway, there's no reason to hurry."

"Yeah. Harutora said it. Also - Touji, how long can your 'transformation' last for?"

"As it is right now, twenty minutes. But it can only last five minutes if we're fighting at full power."

"Understood. Then, we'll wait for a critical moment for Touji to step in. I, Harutora, and Kon will be in front, then Kurahashi-san and Touji. Kurahashi-san, position Hakuou and Kokfuu to the left and right of the circle.

"Understood!"

Then, last is Tenma-kun and Dairenji-san. Dairenji-san, stay at the back....."

"Very nice. You talk so big. I'll enjoy being at the back, then. Me, the 'Child Prodigy' of the 'Twelve Divine Generals'."

Suzuka heavily stressed the phrases 'Twelve Divine Generals' and 'Child Prodigy' in her reply. "Yeah." Natsume smiled slightly.

Harutora and the others complied with Natsume's instructions, quickly moving to their positions. The shikigami didn't attack, slowly narrowing their enclosure. The frontline shikigami scratched the ground with their claws, emitting strange sounds to scare them.

"...Really, it was like they were trapped in a beast's cage.

Harutora's hand that gripped the shakujou sweated coldly. He wiped the sweat with the hem of his uniform, then held the shakujou again.

"......Alright. Then..... let's move."

Natsume quietly gave the instruction. Harutora and the others nodded, carefully starting to move.

The first target was the exit of the cafeteria. Harutora and the others were next to the tables by the windows, so they had to pass through almost the entire cafeteria on the way.

The shikigami surrounding them noticed the movements of Harutora and the others.

Their intimidation surged, and they even started to feign motions of charging forward. Harutora, at the front, responded to the shikigamis' movements one by one, calmly changing the direction he pointed the shakujou. Before he realized it, he was clenching his teeth so hard it hurt his temple.

Harutora had just had the thought that it was 'like they were trapped in a beast's cage'. Now, it seemed surprisingly appropriate. The movements of the black

group of shikigami extremely resembled hounds surrounding prey. Each individual moved chaotically, but the group they formed was extremely organized and seemed to have a 'hunting rhythm'.

Right now, it was just an 'overture', but it was rapidly playing towards a climax - Harutora's whole body felt so.

"......Hey. It's almost....."

"......Ah. It's here....."

Harutora and Touji whispered quietly.

The conversation of the two obviously also floated to the ears of the other four. Their nerves were extremely tense, and they could probably even clearly hear the sound of the people next to them swallowing saliva.

In this period of stalemate, Harutora and the others continuously crept forward. Compared to them, the shikigami's actions became even more agitated and upset.

The balance was finally broken.

A shikigami in front - in front of Harutora - suddenly let out a roar and charged forward.

"It's coming!"

Harutora swung the shakujou, stopping the shikigami's charge. Kon instantly swing her wakizashi, cutting the shikigami's leg.

But the shikigami wasn't cowed. It wasn't concerned about Kon's attack, forcefully pushing away Harutora's shakujou. Harutora hastily infused magical energy into the shakujou, using the ring-formed blade of magical energy to cut open the shikigami.

Even so, the shikigami still approached Harutora.

It was unsure whether this kind of black shikigami could feel pain or not. Its anthropomorphic, bestial face stared at Harutora, no feeling of pain visible on it. As it suffered intense lag, it still showed excited feelings for hunting its prey.

"...Ah, this thing!"

Harutora upped his magical energy again. Just then, Natsume's arm flashed by from the side as she used a charm - a metal-element charm - to hit the shikigami.

"Order!"

The charm became sharp blades, cutting apart the shikigami's neck. The shikigami finally stopped under an outbreak of lag.

But, other shikigami attacked again. With the first shikigami as an impetus, all of them moved to kill Harutora and the others like a surging wave.

Touji, Kyouko, and Tenma chanted incantations at the shikigami. Charms flew and magic exploded sequentially. Hakuou and Kokfuu also slashed their katana and spear horizontally.

But it was hard to resist.

The black shikigami were extremely strong. Each one was 'hard to deal with'.

They either avoided Hakuou and Kokfuu's blades, or simply continued charging forward unhindered after being wounded. With Harutora, Touji, and Tenma's levels of magic, stopping the enemy's advance already took their full power. After they combined everyone's' strengths and attacked repeatedly to finally defeat a shikigami, another one would charge up to replace it from behind. They had mentioned an extended battle, but they had to go all-out from the start. If they slacked for a moment, they would immediately be engulfed by the group of shikigami.

"Hey, hey! This group feels like small fry, but they're not at all!"

"This is bad! If this goes on, our charms will be used up quickly!"

Harutora brandished the shakujou and shouted, Tenma flung charms while shouting with a pale face, and even Natsume and Kyouko didn't have time to reply, already burdened with continuously using magic and chanting incantations. Kon, Hakuou, and Kokfuu, who were outside the ring, were overwhelmed by the many black shikigami.

"Kon! You're getting too far from us!"

"H-Harutora-sama! I am alright!"

Even Kon's slashing wakizashi had trouble opening up a path, and with the enemies concentrated on both sides, she couldn't rashly use her foxfire. Even so, Kon slashed furiously to keep the enemies from approaching Harutora.

...Bastards! We defeated the first shikigami so easily, so we underestimated them!

Looking back, the shikigami that had become the medium Doman spoke through had constantly been touching the academy barrier while he had been conversing with Harutora and the others, unconcerned about the intense lag its body had suffered. That shikigami had received quite serious wounds at the time.

But shikigami didn't show injury on the outside at all. Hence, Kon and Harutora had unconsciously underestimated this kind of shikigami when they had easily defeated that one.

More importantly, there was a significant difference in number between the two sides, as well as in overall magical energy. But the most glaring problem was that six could not contend against many. Never mind advancing in the direction of the exit, it already took their full strength to maintain a circle in front of these overwhelming numbers.

No, they were reaching the limits of even maintaining a circle.

"Bastards! We can't conserve our power right now!"

The shikigami slashed their claws, unafraid of the thrown charms. Touji, who was almost slashed, swiped the bandanna off his forehead.

He planned on releasing the seal of his oni, and Natsume didn't intend to stop him. She didn't have the leisure to make an order in the first place.

But, just then.

"...Get back."

Suzuka ordered.

At some point, a book had appeared in Suzuka's hand - a beautifully-bound scripture. The scripture opened by itself in Suzuka's hands as if it were being turned by the wind. The pages inside flew into the air one by one, folding, sticking, and overlapping to rapidly form 'shapes'.

Fine shikigami with actual size were created mimicking the forms of many wild beasts. Moreover, they vigorously paced back and forth as if they had been given life. Harutora unconsciously gasped. He had witnessed this before. These were the original shikigami of the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka.

The paper shikigami that Suzuka summoned collided head-on with Doman's black shikigami.

Use numbers to combat the enemy's numbers. The paper shikigami had already passed through the circle, attacking the black shikigami through the gaps between the other five - according to their master's orders - and beating them back.

They readjusted their almost completely crumbled formation. In moments, the two sides had already become evenly matched. Putting aside Harutora and Touji, who had witnessed it before, as well as Natsume, who knew her power, Kyouko and Tenma, who witnessed this scene for the first time, looked back at Suzuka, stunned. The 'Child Prodigy's magic was this shocking. Finally catching his breath, Harutora cheered loudly with a huge smile.

"Amazing! Amazing! Suzuka!"

"Ha, so easy."

"As expected of Suzuka. You're making my heart race!"

"Gya! I-I-Idiot! What are you saying all of a sudden, you idiot!"

Suzuka's retorts also became disorganized as her face suddenly reddened down to her neck. Fortunately, Suzuka's shikigami could probably move independently, and they weren't affected by their master's embarrassment, indifferently holding fast to their duties.

She was young and had originally been a researcher, but the power of a Divine General really was deserving of their fame. She was fearsome as an enemy, but after becoming a companion, she was extremely reliable. Harutora couldn't help but feel grateful.

...Yes. I never thought the day would come to fight alongside this girl.

His battle with Suzuka before the 'Imperial Hill' altar seemed to have already become a distant memory. Thinking carefully, it hadn't even been a year. If he told his past self about the current situation, he definitely wouldn't have been able to believe it.

No, it wasn't just Suzuka. Maybe Touji could have passed, but a year ago he couldn't possible have imagined facing enemies in battle together with Kyouko, Tenma, and Natsume. Come to think of it, who would he be with one year later, and what would he be doing? These incredible emotions spilled forth from Harutora's chest as he fought alongside his classmate companions, surrounded by the shikigami released by a legendary Onmyouji.

Touji, who didn't release the seal, put his removed headband into a pocket of his uniform.

".....I see. You just wanted to prove that you could 'deal with them easily alone'. But, Dairenji, has your magical energy really been sealed?"

"O, Of course! Let me make it clear, this is all I can do! You have to think of something yourselves!"

Suzuka replied, the redness still not vanished from her face.

Come to think of it, Suzuka had only summoned only about a dozen shikigami. It was indeed a bit insignificant compared to the torrential numbers she had displayed last summer.

But this dozen was already enough to bring about an even battle against Doman's shikigami. To Harutora, who had only thought about buying time without any intention of driving away the enemy, this fighting power was enough to rejoice over.

"Also, why don't you start fighting for real too! Indeed, these things aren't all idiots, and they have some frightening numbers. But no matter what, they can't reach the level of the Armored Juggernaut as an enemy, right?"

Suzuka glared over his shoulder from behind him with a fearsome gaze.

The one she was eyeing angrily was - Natsume, at the head of the group.

".....Okay."

Natsume looked ahead and replied with that.

Using her 'original' voice that she forgot to hide:

"I finally understand thanks to you. If we're defeated, our strategy of buying time will lose its meaning. Rather than continuing to exhaust everyone, it's better to escape into a barrier as soon as possible."

Suzuka gasped, and Harutora and Touji muttered 'idiot', their cheeks twitching. Kyouko and Tenma, who didn't understand what Natsume was talking about, seemed to doubt their own ears.

Natsume wasn't concerned about the surrounding reactions.

She focused her entire concentration:

"I'll make an opening - Come, Hokuto!"

Natsume summoned her shikigami. Ahead of them - behind the backs of the black shikigami that formed an enclosure - appeared a golden, dazzling light.

The light source carried a majestic aura. Doman's black shikigami howled in consternation upon touching the aura.

On the other hand, the light source suddenly extended, becoming a shining golden ribbon of light, and then contracted.

A dragon appeared.

Its body was about ten meters, completely covered by golden scales and with two horns and a mane. This was the Tsuchimikado family spiritual beast that Natsume used, Hokuto.

At the same time as Hokuto took form, it showed a look of surprise as if to say 'how cramped'. This cafeteria could be called spacious, but in the end it was indoors. In particular, the height of the ceiling was only the level of a normal building, and Hokuto's horns would hit the ceiling if it just slightly raised its head. From Hokuto's point of view, this space was stifling.

More importantly, there were a large number of Doman's shikigami in this narrow place. Hokuto stretched its long body. The terrifying presence that the shikigami gave off seemed to also make Hokuto feel unhappy.

But compared to the shikigami, who suddenly lost its vigor, the current Natsume was raring to go.

"Hokuto! Obey your master! Strike down these black shikigami! Open a path ahead of us!"

An awe-inspiring and aura-filled voice commanded Hokuto.

The dragon's body shuddered for a bit, and it changed expressions.

The change was so obvious that even Harutora and the others could even see it clearly from behind.

Hokuto floated in the cafeteria while looking down upon Doman's many shikigami.

Ssssss... It took a deep breath, and then roared loudly.

The air in the room shook intensely as if there had been an explosion, the roar becoming a shockwave. Harutora, who stood with Natsume at the frontlines, seemed to feel his own heart momentarily stop beating.

Hokuto's roar carried an indignant draconic will and a noble aura. Doman's shikigami showed intense lag just from being immersed in the roar.

Using this opportunity, Hokuto attacked.

Its level of agility was completely unfitting for its gigantic body. Its golden scales flashed sharply as it sped through the narrow room.

It moved like lightning.

...Uwah!

An appalling pressure made Harutora hold his breath. Hokuto cleanly swept away the shikigami before Natsume and Harutora.

Moreover, it utilized its whole body, using its claws, body, and tail to strike down the black shikigami surrounding the ring. The strong aura pressure that was released at a close distance even almost blew away Harutora and the others. "Uwah!" Tenma fell on the ground, hastily standing back up.

Probably because its momentum was so great, Hokuto planted its claws into the ceiling and floor, carving out long gashes before stopping. Then, it did the same thing again. It charged towards the area where the shikigami were numerous, defeating the enemy with impunity.

Harutora and the others were dumbfounded.

"Th, That thing's so incredible....."

Harutora had already witnessed the dragon's strength, but this time Hokuto was brave and cruel. It was extremely rare for the capricious dragon to immediately follow its master's orders, and even Suzuka, who had urged Natsume to use her real abilities, widened her eyes, unable to speak.

"Hurry! Let's leave the cafeteria now!"

Natsume commanded, rushing towards the entrance first. Harutora and the others came to their senses, following behind Natsume while maintaining the circle.

Behind their backs, Hokuto defended against countless enemies, showing a brave fighting spirit. Now that he thought about it, this was the first time Hokuto had flown around indoors. If Doman's shikigami were monsters, Hokuto was a beast, and they didn't even dream of coming close. Harutora and the others couldn't even figure out whether they were fleeing from Doman's shikigami or avoiding Hokuto.

"Hey, it's going too far! The floor won't even stop shaking!"

Hokuto was merciless, wantonly twisting its body. Every time the dragon's horns hit the ceiling, a large amount of dust fell from the ceiling, and every time the dragon's tail struck the ground, it would shake like a ripple beneath their feet, practically like a ride in an amusement park. Harutora had actually bitten his tongue three times while saying the words just now.

Every enemy was very strong, so maybe Hokuto couldn't be merciful. If this went on, the cafeteria itself might be destroyed before they drove out the enemy shikigami.

"What are we going to do about the reparations afterwards?"

"Bakatora! Enough, hurry up and run!"

Touji's voice came from behind his back. Harutora clenched his teeth and continued to sprint.

Then, they escaped the cafeteria.

They arrived in the corridor. There were also Doman's shikigami here. But, here there was distance between the two sides. Kon threw fireballs and Natsume also threw charms. After using wood-element charms to bind the burning shikigami, Harutora mustered his strength and swung his shakujou.

The shikigami that had been smashed against the wall fell to the ground alongside intense lag. Even so, their materialized bodies still didn't disappear.....

"We don't have to force ourselves to destroy the enemies! Right now we need to avoid expending extra energy!"

Harutora and the others complied with Natsume's instructions, swiftly passing through the corridor. The bound shikigami still wanted to obstruct them with their bodies. Kokfuu stabbed them directly with its spear as they passed by, while Hakuou was responsible for checking the shikigami that appeared in front of them. After Kyouko used a protective charm to erect a defensive wall to stop the enemy's movements, they passed by them.

Their goal, the eighth practical training room, was downstairs. They couldn't use the elevator right now.

They could only take the stairs.

Harutora and the others rushed down the stairs headed by Natsume. Kon was in the front, and Suzuka's shikigami took the rear.

Right after they finished walking down a set of stairs, they ran into Doman's shikigami again. This time there were three. When one of them charged forward, Harutora swung the shakujou, then Kokfuu hit it flying. But the other two seemed to have seen through the moves of Harutora and the others, circling around to the next set of stairs.

"Order!"

At the same time, Natsume threw out two water-element charms. The magically produced water poured towards the shikigami. As they were cowed, Kon used Kachiwari and Harutora attacked with his shakujou, but the black shikigami held fast, not retreating a single step.

The shikigami that had been knocked flying by Kokfuu attacked again. Kyouko had Kokfuu block it, but because the space in the staircase was too narrow, Hakuou and Suzuka's shikigami couldn't come to the front to join the battle.

"Bastards! Each one is so tough!"

Harutora and the others had stopped moving forward. If this dragged on, they would probably be surrounded by the enemy shikigami again.

But,

"First seal, purge!"

Touji chanted an incantation. The first level of the seal in his body was released, and simultaneously, the presence of the suppressed oni strengthened in a flash.

On his forehead from which the bandanna had been taken off grew horns flickering with lag. Sharp fangs extended from his mouth that showed a fearless smile.

The demonic aura gushing out covered Touji's body, condensing and forming armor. Flashing, half-transparent armor and a helmet. This was Touji in his living spirit state.

The transformed Touji advanced towards the shikigami that attacked Harutora and Natsume to counterattack, flying out between the two of them and spreading his arms, grabbing the heads of the two shikigami.

Swiftly,

"Hah!"

He repelled the shikigami with a shout. Touji charged down towards the platform between staircases, smashing Doman's shikigami into the wall.

The wall shook. The two shikigami were embedded into the wall, lag covering their bodies.

"Touji!"

"...I'm fine. We can rest once we enter the barrier!"

Touji replied angrily to Harutora's shout.

Though they had escaped the danger of the cafeteria, they still couldn't be careless right now. Natsume pursed her lips, rushing down the stairs past Touji. Harutora also hastily followed behind, and Touji, who was holding down the shikigami, quickly returned to the ring.

"Natsume, switch with me. I'll take care of breaking through."

"...Understood."

Harutora was more suitable for frontline combat with the shakujou for a weapon. That was why he wanted to switch with Natsume. Natsume quickly stepped back, and Touji took the empty position.

Now Harutora and Touji became the vanguard of the formation. They continued moving down after passing over the staircase platform.

They ran into several black shikigami again midway. Harutora checked them with the shakujou, and the transformed Touji freely released his demonic power. After he, who had originally been extremely good at fighting, became a demon, his strength was enhanced by orders of magnitude, quickly becoming unmatched in terms of strength. Putting aside magical battles for now, Touji's skills could be fully utilized in the current, completely close-range battle.

"Touji, don't overdo it!"

"What nonsense are you saying. I can't waste this valuable battle experience!"

Touji laughed after hearing Harutora's warning. Judging from this extremely Touji-style reply, he was still extremely calm.

...But!

Touji himself had said that the time was limited to five minutes. They didn't have time to spare. Harutora and the others descended the stairs at almost their full speed.

But, there was still another staircase between them and the eighth practical training room. Kon, who flew above their heads, suddenly widened her eyes.

She flew down the stairs ahead of them.

Then,

"...! This is bad, Harutora-sama!"

She returned to Harutora's side while crying out. The moment Harutora asked her "What's wrong", a certain 'activity' emanated from the base of the stairs.

Doman's black shikigami. But this time it wasn't one or two. The number of shikigami completely covered the staircase. They couldn't see the walls, nor could they see the ceiling. They filled the space down below along the stairs.

"What!"

Even Harutora and Touji groaned, stopping their steps. They didn't know that this was a group of shikigami that Doman had released into the building after he had invaded the academy.

"...Hey! Harutora, let me borrow that!"

Touji quickly grabbed the shakujou from Harutora's hands.

He left Harutora, charging forward alone.

"Touji!"

"...Is it enough?"

Touji raised the shakujou level, filling it with his magical energy.

The demonic power swelled in the shakujou and extended out of both ends, colliding head-on with the group of black shikigami that approached.

"Ah - ugh!"

Touji held onto the shakujou, stopping the group of shikigami in their tracks. Inauspicious demonic aura flowed out of Touji's entire body, and the armor covering him flickered with intense lag.

But, 'it wasn't enough'. No matter how narrow the staircase was, a single shakujou couldn't completely defend it. The shikigami in the back climbed up using the shikigami that Touji blocked as stepping stones. Black shikigami broke through Touji's defense from the walls and the ceiling, almost engulfing Touji.

"Touji!"

"Order!"

Harutora shouted, and Natsume hastily threw out a charm, but it wasn't enough to stop the shikigamis' advance. The black shikigami passed over Touji like a flood.

...Damn!

Harutora's face paled and he grabbed all of his protective charms.

Right before Harutora was about to throw them:

"Hurry up and move aside!"

Suzuka, who felt the weight of the situation, forcefully pushed aside Kyouko, Natsume, and Harutora in front of her, letting her shikigami charge forward.

An intense collision.

The stairs where Harutora and the others were shook intensely. Natsume held on to Harutora, while Harutora quickly grabbed the staircase banister.

The moment the black shikigami and the group of paper shikigami forcefully collided, they all stopped moving along with lag. The 'Child Prodigy's resourcefulness had been effective, managing to control the shikigami that were about to get around Touji.

But this was just a momentary equilibrium. Doman's shikigami poured forth again. Their numbers were abnormally clear, and the 'defensive wall' that Touji and Suzuka' shikigami created was being pushed back before their eyes.

"Touji, are you alright?"

"You're asking if I'm alright? Obviously no!"

He angrily roared a reply to Harutora's question as he braced his legs with all of his might.

"I bragged a little just now, but breaking through this group is too difficult!"

In the time he spent speaking, he was almost overwhelmed. Touji hastily regained his foothold. His feet were already sinking into the staircase floor, and the shakujou that had been strengthened with magical energy was also letting out creaking noises. It was already a foregone conclusion that they couldn't break through. Kon, flying overhead, hurriedly joined the 'defensive wall', but it was a drop in the bucket.

Natsume bit her lip.

"...Let's try other routes. Retreat for now!"

"Wait, Natsume. If we withdraw rashly, it'll become even worse!"

"I understand. Then for now - come!"

Natsume raised her head to look up. Just then, a golden light descended from the stairs above them.

It was Hokuto. After cleaning up the enemies in the cafeteria, it had come following its master.

"Hokuto! Stop the enemy - the black shikigamis' attack. Touji-kun, Dairenji-san, make space for Hokuto's attack!"

"Okay!"

"......Tch."

Touji did everything he could, Suzuka controlled her shikigami, and Kon also shouted out.

They pushed away the enemy with all their might. A gap immediately appeared in the 'defensive wall', and Natsume had Hokuto break through that gap.

Hokuto's body radiated a fearsome aura. It no longer planned on using little things like its claws or fangs, planning instead on using its aura to drive away the group of shikigami. Oh! ...It suddenly twisted its body, using the recoil to leap

towards the enemy, advancing as if it were drilling through the ground and charging into the group of shikigami.

Under Hokuto's powerful assault, the area around the stairs shook intensely as if there was an earthquake. Harutora and the others hastily escaped to take refuge in the stairs above.

After seeing the attack of Doman's shikigami gradually slow, Touji gave the 'defensive wall' work to Suzuka's shikigami and retreated.

He gave the shakujou back to Harutora. Before confirming that he had taken it:

"Natsume, what do you mean by other routes?"

"......The emergency staircase."

"Impossible!" After hearing Natsume reply while showing such a serious expression, Harutora took the shakujou, refuting her in surprise.

"It's too narrow, it's incredibly dangerous! If we fall, we're done for!"

"But there aren't any other routes."

The emergency staircase was set along the academy's outer wall. Right now, it wasn't clear whether the enemy had left any shikigami outside, and in the open space, Hokuto could utilize more of its power.

But, it was easier for the enemy to attack in that open space. It was also hard to use the two-pronged ring formation that they were currently maintaining in the emergency staircase. At least they wouldn't be able to have Hakuou and Kokfuu guarding their left and right. More importantly, just like Harutora said, there was the danger of falling, and there was a possibility that the emergency staircase itself would be attacked.

"Can't we have Hokuto quickly break open a path for us to go down?"

"No. Right now, Hokuto and I are sharing vision, but when we go downstairs, we'll be overrun by shikigami for sure. Even if Hokuto can drive them into

disarray, she can't wipe out all the enemies. Most importantly..... Hokuto can't keep holding out, either."

As Natsume said, though the enemy shikigamis' momentum was gradually slowing, they were still approaching up the stairs. With Hokuto's aid, the defensive wall created by Suzuka's shikigami was able to block them. If they wanted to break through, they would have to be resolved to suffer wounds.

"Let's move for now. Even Suzuka-chan's shikigami won't be able to hold on alone."

After Kyouko proposed, she muttered "sorry" to Suzuka.

But, just then.

"...Is that Kyouko-san's voice?"

Upon hearing the sudden voice, Kyouko's as well as everyone else's eyes widened. The faint voice was familiar.

"Principal?"

"Grandma!"

This was the voice of Principal Kurahashi. Moreover, it came from the other side of the defensive wall - from the direction of Hokuto and Doman's shikigami. The moment Harutora murmured "could it be", a calico cat jumped out from a gap in Suzuka's shikigami.

When they had gazed down from the cafeteria before, it had been this calico cat - the shikigami that the principal used - confronting Doman at the main entrance.

"This is great! Everyone's safe and sound. Hurry up and follow me!"

Right as the words left its mouth, the cat passed by the surprised Harutora and the others, rushing up the stairs with the momentum of a dash.

"Hurry up!" It suddenly turned back while standing on the stairs above, speaking up to urge them on, and then didn't look back. Harutora and the others stood still, stunned.

"Eh, hey - Grandma!"

"Principal! But, up there is.....!'

Kyouko and Tenma's panicked cries seemed not to reach the principal's ears.

"Natsume."

Harutora gave the right of judgment to Natsume, who was responsible for commanding.

"Let's go."

After a moment's hesitation, Natsume decided this. Compared to forcefully going down the dangerous stairs, it would be more reasonable to listen to the principal's opinion.

"Dairenji-san. Your shikigami--"

"...Have them stop the enemy and retreat slowly."

"Yes. We're counting on you. ...Everyone, follow the principal's shikigami. Continue maintaining the formation. We can't be careless!"

After saying that, she began pursuing the principal's shikigami, backtracking along their original route. Harutora and the others nodded at each other, following behind Natsume.

They couldn't help but feel a sense of futility as they backtracked, but fortunately, no new shikigami appeared along the stairs. Hokuto had probably wiped them all out. Instead, the handrails were destroyed and cracks spread along the walls and steps. "Pay attention to below you!" Touji warned everyone.

After they saw the cat's tail in front of them,

"Grandma!"

Kyouko shouted loudly.

"What's going on? What's happened?"

"...It's Ashiya Doman's attack. I surmised that he wouldn't come here - it seems like I failed completely. My name as a diviner is weeping."

"What does that mean? Please explain in more detail!"

"Of course. But after we escape."

The principal was also very anxious. She continued sprinting forward while keeping a lookout while she replied to her granddaughter.

But,

"Priest Doman has already invaded the interior of the academy. The lower areas are full of his shikigami."

"So we're escaping upwards? But what do we do after escaping to the top? Do you have a plan?"

After listening to Natsume's question, the principal replied while running.

"To the roof."

"The roof? We can climb to the roof from the academy building?"

Harutora asked back in surprise.

The academy building's elevator could only reach the top floor. He had never heard about the roof since he had entered the academy. But the principal said "yes" again, confirming Harutora's doubts.

"There are stairs on the top floor. Originally, no one other than me is allowed to pass..... Right now is an emergency situation. We'll use the barrier there."

That place also had a barrier. Kyouko complained "Please say it earlier if we have that kind of option" with a red face. It seemed like this was her first time hearing about the roof.

While they talked, Harutora and the others, with the cat in the lead, returned to the top floor where the cafeteria was.

After rushing down many flights of stairs and then climbing back up, the four people other than Harutora and Touji were all panting for breath. The principal hastened her steps instead, passing through the corridor in a flash.

"...Here!"

Under the cat's guidance, Harutora and the others still stuck to their run, breathing heavily.

Doman's shikigami appeared in front of them again. But the cat was unafraid, nimbly twisting its small body and passing under the enemies' legs.

Then, it continued running without reducing its speed.

This action was as if she were unconcerned about the students following behind. But in reality, of course this wasn't the case. She meant to say that they didn't need to slow down to defeat an obstruction of this level.

...This kind of tutelage was too Spartan!

In the end, just as the principal had expected, the current Harutora and the others no longer felt afraid facing a few shikigami.

Kon used her fox fire to check them, and Harutora's shakujou along with Touji's attack sent the enemies blocking their path flying. Then, Hakuou and Kokfuu to the left and right didn't give the shikigami an opportunity to come close, and everyone passed through the corridor.

When danger appeared, Natsume, Kyouko, Tenma, and Suzuka released charms to ensure their safety. This was how the formation Natsume organized was effective - each member looked out for one another as they advanced.

The principal's target was the end of the corridor. It looked like a dead end.

But,

"...Open!"

The moment the cat shouted, a metal door appeared on the wall. Harutora's eyes widened. "Whoa!"

It seemed to be hidden with magic. This way, no one would notice.

"The lock's already opened. Push the door open."

The principal finally stopped, turning back. Harutora rushed forward to push the door open in place of the cat. So that's how it was, the purpose of this place was for stairs up.

After opening the door, the cat immediately slipped in and started climbing the stairs. Doman's shikigami hadn't invaded this hidden location. After the group followed behind, they quickly saw a narrow passage - probably the door that accessed the roof.

Harutora climbed in, opening the door again.

"This place is.....!"

He passed through the door and arrived at the roof. The humid air, filled with moisture, immediately enclosed Harutora's body.

Exposed pipes littered the ground, forming a space like a maze when surrounded by the thin wire fence, practically like a giant jungle gym. The cat dashed through the complex path again and Harutora and the others chased behind the cat, their footsteps sounding in clatters. They couldn't go side by side through the narrow path, so it naturally became Harutora alone at the head of the group.

There were two spaces on the roof. The first was where Harutora and the others were now, a piping space like a maze. The other space was higher up - a raised space about three meters higher. The cat passed through the narrow route, climbing the simple steps to the raised area. Harutora also quickly chased it to the base of the stairs.

There was only the sky above him now when he looked up. Harutora regulated his rapid breathing, grabbing the handrail and climbing to the top of the stairs in a flash.

His field of vision suddenly cleared.

There was nothing bounding the space before him, but it was wide and flat. There were no guardrails set around the edges; it was just covered with a low wall.

There were no structures nearby taller than the Onmyou Academy. Hence, his vision was unhindered and the force of the wind was strong. Above his head were gray clouds, low enough that it seemed he could touch them if he threw a ball with all his might. The wind made a wailing noise and changed rapidly.

At the same time, Doman's black shikigami flew around the surroundings with the turbid, cloudy day as a backdrop.

It wasn't just above. There were also a dozen on the roof, probably a group of the ones that had surrounded the academy at the start that had been left outside. Most of the shikigami should have invaded the academy interior, but even so, there were still quite a few shikigami that had been ordered to stay outside.

But, it wasn't the black shikigami spread around the area that drew Harutora's interest the most right now. Rather, it was the deepest part of the raised area, across the place that Harutora had climbed up to - on the side of the academy entrance.

There was an altar.

A stone stage with torii set in four directions. Four torii. The north side was black, the east side was blue, the south side was red, and the west side was white.

Harutora stopped moving.

He was assaulted by an unexpected sight.

...This was!

The property of the Tsuchimikado main family, the altar with its back to the 'Imperial Hill'. The altar of the 'Taizan Fukun Ritual'.

Last summer, Harutora and Natsume had once fought with Suzuka on that altar.

"......How's this possible!"

...It was exactly the same..... right? With that altar? Why was it here!

Harutora's thoughts were in chaos. The cat that had led the way didn't pay attention to Harutora's stunned reaction, running vigorously towards the altar.

Kon, who was focused on combatting the enemies, felt her master's condition. "H-Harutora-sama?" She turned around to look at Harutora. But, Harutora couldn't move his gaze from the altar.

"Hey! What are you spacing out for!"

Touji leaped, jumping past Harutora, who had stopped on the stairs, but when he saw the altar, "...What!" his expression also froze. He hadn't participated in the battle back then, but he had once seen the altar on the Imperial Hill.

Just then,

"Everyone, come here!"

A figure appeared next to the altar and shouted towards Harutora and the others, her voice exactly the same as the cat's from just before.

"......Principal Kurahashi."

The Principal Kurahashi that they hadn't been able to contact since the morning appeared on the stone stage of the altar. Harutora finally came to his senses, climbing up to the raised area with a solemn expression. Natsume, who followed behind him, also momentarily paled after seeing the altar.

"How...! Why is this here!?"

After the shaken Natsume, Kyouko climbed up to the raised area. A relieved expression flashed across her face after she saw her grandmother. Behind her was Tenma, and finally was Suzuka, who also showed an astonished expression upon seeing the altar.

But,

"...! Dairenji-san!"

Tenma hastily pulled the stunned Suzuka towards him. In the next moment, a black shikigami slashed its claws at the position where Suzuka had just been.

This shikigami had quietly approached them from the bottom of the stairs. Tenma and Suzuka fell on their backsides from their momentum.

Kyouko hastily instructed Hakuou and Kokfuu to push the enemy shikigami back. But, there wasn't just one approaching shikigami. While everyone's eyes had been drawn to the altar, they hadn't noticed the group of shikigami approach.

"Hurry!"

The principal shouted again. Harutora tightly gritted his teeth, turning back to look at his companions.

".....Go, run!"

After hearing Harutora's order, Touji rapidly pulled Tenma and Suzuka up. After Suzuka cursed "bastard", she rushed towards the altar. Kyouko used her two shikigami to keep the enemy in check while running to the altar.

"Natsume."

Harutora urged again, and Natsume also finally started running. Doman's shikigami attacked again, and Harutora and the others grouped up to guard against being divided by the enemy.

They ran towards the altar where the principal was.

When Harutora and the other six all reached the stone stage, the principal brought out a round mirror from her bosom.

Raising the mirror to the sky, she chanted an incantation.

"Close the sanctuary, scatter the evil - Heaven's Seal!"

Suddenly, a holy aura flowed from the mirror and became a swirl.

As if it were responding to the mirror's aura, the torii on all sides of the stone stage surrounding them flashed with light, lighting up in the colors black, blue, red, and white. Then, a yellow color faintly showed from the mirror.

The five colors wrapped around the altar, flashing brightly again and then vanishing. But after the light vanished, it formed a tough magical defensive wall - a barrier. The principal sighed lightly, putting the mirror back in her clothes.

The black shikigami seemed to be afraid of the altar's light. They gathered around the altar after the light disappeared.

But not only were they unable to pass the torii, they didn't even dare come close enough to touch it. They just watched the interior from afar, making no threatening actions. Doman's shikigami, which had been able to safely touch the barrier covering the academy although they had been unable to break it, seemed to dislike the altar's barrier - no, it was more like they felt fear.

".....We're saved....."

Harutora relaxed his breath, muttering.

Just then,

"...Reboot."

Touji's pained chant came from behind his back. He sat on the stone stage as if he had crumbled.

The armor covering his body vanished, and the oni was sealed again. The face that showed from under the helmet still had a fearless smile, but it was pale and stiff. In a short period of time, he had become this languished.

"Oh man oh man. And I was thinking that would be the end of me."

"You..... I told you not to force yourself!"

Thinking back, Touji had already released the oni's seal for more than five minutes. But his good friend didn't have any intent on reflecting. He indifferently and unabashedly proclaimed: "Real battle is the best training".

It wasn't just Touji. Kyouko released Hakuou and Kokfuu's materializations, gasping for breath. She had also been continuously using magic while having the two defensive shikigami summoned. Though her exhaustion wasn't as severe as Touji's, clear beads of sweat rolled down her face.

But, they could relax after escaping into the barrier. But only Harutora, Touji, Kyouko, and Tenma.

"......Principal Kurahashi."

Natsume questioned the principal with a serious expression.

"This place... what exactly is going on with this place? This is the altar for the Taizan Fukun Ritual passed down in the Tsuchimikado Family! Why is this altar on the Onmyou Academy roof?"

The Kurahashi family was a branch family of the Tsuchimikados, but the Taizan Fukun Ritual was a secret passed down generation by generation and controlled completely by the main family. Even the Kurahashi family should be unrelated

with the Taizan Fukun Ritual. More importantly, no one at all would think there was an altar on the Onmyou Academy roof.

Suzuka also watched the principal's reaction with a sharp look. Kyouko couldn't help but feel uneasy, looking at the severe attitudes of the two of them.

But, not only did the principal not reply to Natsume's question, she didn't even turn around to look at her.

She looked in the direction from which Harutora and the others had climbed up to the raised area:

"......I said just now, I'll explain when this is over. Extremely unfortunately, we still haven't been 'saved'."

She spoke calmly.

Indeed, Harutora and the others had just escaped into a barrier, and the current situation couldn't really be called 'being saved'. At the least, they couldn't drop their guard until the assistance of the Onmyou Agency and the Exorcist Bureau arrived.

But this wasn't the true meaning in the principal's words.

After climbing to the raised area, they could no longer see the piping space on the roof. Of course, that was the same about the door to the floor.

Suddenly, an intense shattering sound came from the direction of that door. It was a violent sound as if metal was being stretched, torn, and smashed. Moreover, it didn't just happen once, twice, or three times. It continued to sound. Harutora and the others looked in the direction of the door in confusion.

In the next moment, something shot out of the piping area alongside a crashing sound, flying to a place even higher than the raised area.

It was the door of the roof entrance. Immediately after, black shikigami suddenly poured forth like smoke spreading after an explosion. Harutora and the others unconsciously took defensive stances.

"From the stairs before?"

"Ah. It seems like they've already broken to the roof from inside the academy."

Touji calmly expressed agreement after hearing Harutora's question.

When Harutora and the others had given up on escaping down the stairs, the enemy shikigami they had encountered had literally flooded the stairs. Hokuto should have defeated quite a few of that group of shikigami, and Suzuka's shikigami were still there stopping them.

But, Doman had released shikigami outside of those, and they had finally arrived at the roof from the first floor. That meant that Doman had completely suppressed the interior of the academy - at least the portion from the ground up.

Then--

"...I've made you wait."

The spines of the six suddenly froze.

...The voice just now, could it be.....!

Their widened eyes looked near the entrance. They could only see the four sides of the raised area from the altar. One black shikigami after another began crossing these borders.

This scene was like spirits of the dead clambering up from their underground world. It made them despair.

But Harutora still hadn't moved his gaze.

Not long after--

A large, coarse hand was placed on the border of the raised area.

An oni that seemed to be made up of ink easily jumped up to the three-meter-high raised area. No, it wasn't just one. There was still another. Two oni in total landed on the raised area. But, these two oni weren't what they truly feared.

There was a black-clothed old man riding on the shoulder of one of the oni.

His small body was like a child's, with plumage-like white hair. He wore blood-red sunglasses, with a black haori over his black kimono. His dry face looked like a corpse's.

The legendary Onmyouji, Ashiya Doman.

Doman used the staff in his hands to lightly tap the oni shouldering him. The oni lowered him to the roof respectfully, as if it were handling a valuable.

"......!"

Harutora and the others were speechless, only able to stare unblinkingly at the old man.

Doman noticed the gazes of Harutora and the others.

"...Ho, ho..."

He let out a raucous laugh.

The two oni kneeled on either side of Doman, raising a single fist and taking deferential postures.

Doman looked at Harutora and the others, and in a cheerful tone:

"I've made you wait."

He repeated again.

"Save the best for last, isn't that a saying? The excellent actors are all in attendance. Good, good. It is finally time to close the curtain."

Part 3

...That man!

Harutora stared at the black-clothed old man from inside the altar's barrier.

This Onmyouji, Ashiya Doman, was rumored to have competed with the Tsuchimikado family ancestor Abe no Seimei.

This was already the second time they met, but during the first time, Doman hadn't come out of the backseat of his sedan. Even if he hadn't walked out, it had still been enough to sense that he gave off an unusual presence.

And then now. Once they confronted each other, the peculiar and abnormal feel that he sensed at the time became even deeper.

The most surprising thing was his small body. The small old man looked even more like a child between two oni, who were close to three meters tall. The two fearsome oni quietly stayed next to the old man, like dogs obediently waiting for their master's orders.

The aura the old man possessed was very 'strange'.

As for what was strange about it, Harutora couldn't explain very clearly, but there was a mysterious feeling of transgression. Harutora had confronted people with strong auras, like Kogure and Suzuka of the Twelve Divine Generals, and even that 'monster' called Kagami Reiji. But the 'type' of Doman's aura was different from theirs.

".....There are differences in the spiritual type.....?"

Suzuka muttered quietly. "What's that?", Harutora looked back and asked. Suzuka stared daggers at Doman, her face tense.

On the other hand, Doman leisurely looked at the altar.

"......Hmm. The Tsuchimikado altar? Even this old man doesn't understand it well."

He spoke while stroking his chin.

"Never mind the lions at the entrance, it's a surprise that the 'predecessor' is out here. I see. I haven't considered everything..... The Onmyou Academy, hm....."

Strong winds whipped through the roof, and hence Doman's muttering was choppy and unclear. They could only faintly feel that even if Harutora and Doman were looking at the same scene, there was a huge difference in what they could see.

The altar for Tsuchimikado family rite, the Taizan Fukun Ritual, hidden on the roof of the Onmyou Academy building. What kind of scene did this altar map out in Doman's eyes?

Just then,

"......How is it?"

The principal spoke to Doman. Harutora and the others all looked at the principal.

"Did you find what you wanted, Priest?"

"No, unfortunately not."

"You won't find it, no matter how you look. I already said before, but that thing is not here right now."

"Then where is it?"

"I do not know."

"Ho, ho. Well, wouldn't it be fine if you said the Onmyou Agency?"

Doman wasn't mad, nor was he fretful. He replied gracefully.

Then,

"Honestly, my duty is already essentially complete. Before this, I already gave my investigation work to my shikigami. But I came to visit because waiting is too boring."

"......Fujiwara-sensei..... Were those teachers you crossed hands with on the first-floor not enough to appease your boredom?"

"Hmm? Oh, those people. Well, yes. Bluntly put, I'm already tired of seeing small fry like that, and it's very boring to cross hands with them. Though the komainu were fair."

"....."

"Hoho. Don't show that kind of expression. Don't worry, I won't kill, I'll just make everyone unable to move. ...Ah, though there's no longer a need to repair the vessels of those two komainu anymore."

Harutora couldn't help but moan after hearing Doman's casual reply.

...Fujiwara-sensei was--! Moreover, 'the komainu' meant Alpha and Omega?

Just yesterday, their group had received Fujiwara-sensei's special teaching. Harutora felt incredulous at the fact that he had been labeled 'boring' by Doman.

But thinking carefully, that was natural. Though Fujiwara had once been an exorcist, Doman - 'D' - was a honed practitioner who had led the Mystical Investigators in circles for many years. During the Nue incident before, he had even gotten the first move against Kogure and Kagami. Moreover, today he had attacked the Onmyou Academy alone.

If he was the 'true' Ashiya Doman, his power was outstanding throughout history. He could be side to side with Tsuchimikado Yakou or even above him.

The legendary Onmyouji, Ashiya Doman.

After being hounded by countless shikigami and after escaping into barriers became their only method of confrontation, Harutora finally felt first-hand what kind of person this old man before him was. No, he had just come in contact with a small portion of his gigantic existence.

"Well then."

Doman joyfully proclaimed.

"There's still time. What should we play?"

"......Bastard......!'

Harutora quickly took a stance, but actually, the current him was thinking of slipping away and fleeing. The many shikigami still left behind were strong enemies, and if he fought with the two oni and Doman himself, the outcome would be unimaginable. In any case, they could only abandon all direct assaults unless a miracle happened. "......We can only rely on God's blessing now....." Touji said to himself. Actually, there was no longer any need to formulate strategy in the current situation.

But,

"Natsume-san? Please stop."

"...No, let me do it!"

The principal suddenly warned her quietly, and Natsume also replied quietly. The conversation of the two of them extinguished Harutora's thoughts of fighting, but he immediately realized the true meaning of that that dialogue.

The sound of breaking glass came from below the stairs, extending into a long reverberation. Then, the sound of something rapidly tearing through the air rang out again. The moment Harutora turned to look, a bright ribbon flew up high from the edge of the roof.

"Hokuto!"

The shikigami that they had left around the academy stairs, Hokuto.

The dragon turned its long body as it flew high in the sky, its golden scales radiating with light and dissipating a divine aura to its surroundings, looking like a sun rising into the dark sky. That Doman also raised his head with a sharp gaze.

"...The Tsuchimikado dragon, huh. I see. Not a bad show."

Hokuto, who was in the sky, shouldn't have heard his comment, but it stared at Doman, letting out a majestic roar and attacking straight-on. Harutora knew that it was Natsume's shikigami, but the pressure it gave off still made his knees tremble instinctively.

Doman didn't move a muscle at Hokuto's attack. The keen reactions of the oni waiting next to him definitely didn't lose to the dragon.

They stomped on the ground and leaped up, attacking the charging dragon. One flew in front of Doman to act as a meat shield, and the other targeted the dragon's long body and struck from the side, its agile movements contrasting sharply with its lumbering outer appearance.

But Hokuto's movements became even faster against Doman's two oni.

It didn't pay attention to the oni blocking in front, twisting its body in midair and biting the oni attacking it. The oni flying in midair couldn't dodge, nor could it fight back, and was caught between the dragon's jaws. It either had lightning-fast rapid reactions, or Hokuto had planned on attacking the oni guarding Doman and hadn't targeted him from the beginning.

Hokuto's giant fangs sank deeply into the oni's shoulder. With a toss of its head, it threw the intensely 'lagging' oni towards the other.

The two oni were simultaneously knocked flying after crashing into each other. Hokuto clawed with its legs in midair, pursuing the two oni as if it wanted to break through the atmosphere.

The two onis' bodies were pierced.

The moment it passed by, Hokuto's claws tore through the face of the standing oni, and the oni's giant body was filled with lag. Hokuto dig its claws into the edge of the roof, instantly readjusting its position and extending its body to attack the oni a third time. These actions were enough to prove that it recognized Doman's oni as strong enemies and wanted to defeat them completely.

Hokuto bit one of the two oni that were unable to move in their state of 'lag', suddenly raising its sickle-shaped neck and crushing the other into the ground with its claws. Harutora, who watched from the side, could also judge that the outcome had been decided and that it had been an overwhelming victory.

"......So..."

...So powerful!

The momentum Hokuto had showed today was hugely different from before. No, even so, it was still incredibly frightening. When it had fought with the 'Armored Juggernaut' and the Nue, it hadn't had the 'ferocity' that it did now. The reason for this difference wasn't just with Hokuto.

It was Natsume.

Harutora looked at Natsume beside him. Natsume didn't notice Harutora's gaze, focusing her entire concentration on Hokuto. Her face was awe-inspiring, having never been this serious before.

Now that he thought of it, Natsume was the kind to lose her cool in this kind of crucial moment. She wasn't good at dealing with surprises, and would immediately think of escaping when she encountered a situation that surpassed her expectations.

But Natsume had gotten through many crises, and hence she had accumulated a lot of battle experience. Especially today, the feeling of guilt and that 'it's all my fault' in her mind seemed to play a positive role. The strong sense of responsibility in her heart supported her on the battlefield.

Harutora had slowly progressed every day with his personal training. Touji, who was a beginner like Harutora, had also grown notably.

Natsume wasn't excluded either. Though she hadn't exhibited obvious changes like Harutora and the others, she had also matured day by day.

"...Dairenji-san. Are your paper shikigami still in the academy?"

Natsume spoke up to confirm as she watched Hokuto. Suzuka, who had suddenly been called upon, retreated a half a step, quietly muttering "Eh?".

"Th, They're still there. They're still at the stairs from before because you didn't come up with any new instructions....."

"Please summon them here immediately. They'll contain him together with Hokuto. If we can divert his attention, we can buy time. .....Kurahashi-san, use Hakuou and Kokfuu too!"

Unlike Harutora, who planned on giving up, his childhood friend fought Doman head-on - preparing to resist. Natsume's stern posture was clearly engraved into Harutora's mind.

".....That's bad."

Doman's tone was slightly bitter.

Through his blood-red sunglasses, his unmoving gaze stared at the dragon that had defeated the oni. It seemed that Hokuto's strength had even surpassed Doman's predictions. Hence, the faint light of hope appeared in Harutora's heart.

But, that wasn't it.

That wasn't the case.

"How disappointing. You're letting a dragon of this level just 'run wild'?"

Doman continued speaking with the same bitter voice as before. Harutora couldn't help but doubt his own ears.

"Natsume-san! Dematerialize your dragon!"

The principal hastily ordered. Doubt and resentment inadvertently flashed through Natsume's heart. But she still made a prompt decision and followed the principal's instructions.

But it was already too late.

"...It's alright. Bind!"

Alongside Doman's order, the two oni dissolved into viscous material. The two oni that had originally seemed like ink drawings seemed to return to their original ink state, their outlines suddenly crumbling. The dragon's fangs bit into nothing. Hokuto backed up with a cry. But the two oni didn't let it go, the sticky liquid - almost like molasses - binding around the fleeing dragon.

Then, it constricted and suppressed its freedom.

"Hokuto!"

The entangled Hokuto wanted to rapidly escape to the sky. But the transformed oni seemed to be firmly rooted to the roof, sealing away Hokuto's movement. Natsume frantically tried to release Hokuto's materialization.

But:

".....What's going on!? I can't dematerialize Hokuto!"

Harutora didn't understand the meaning in Natsume's words for a moment.

With a grim face, the principal said:

"It's because its connection with the present world is being forcefully suspended. This is bad. If this goes on.....!"

Right as the words left her mouth, the principal formed a seal with her hands.

A resolved expression appeared on her face:

"You who dominates everything, Kongou Doji - On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

She rapidly chanted an incantation, thrusting her hand seal towards Hokuto and releasing magic across the barrier. The two oni binding the dragon released the dragon's body for a moment.

It was only a moment.

"Oh."

Doman let out a joyful sigh, forming a blade seal with one hand and swinging it towards Hokuto and the principal. The torn-off oni once again tightly bound the dragon.

Hokuto thrashed back and forth on the roof like a fish out of water. It flicked its giant body and moved its legs vigorously, but the two oni had completely blocked off the dragon's resistance, like a judo master holding down an enemy.

"Hoho - how is it? This dragon will become this old man's shikigami if this goes on, you know?"

Doman laughed while speaking. The blood drained out of Natsume's face.

In legend, one of Ashiya Doman's shikigami had been stolen away by Abe no Seimei, and then he conceded defeat.

But now.....

"It's very troublesome and I'm normally unwilling to do this, but the Tsuchimikado dragon moves even my heart. When you add in the blood of Seimei, those thoughts become even stronger."

Doman laughed and spoke like a child. Compared to him, Harutora and the others' spines were frozen, and despair was already visible on Natsume's face.

...No way..... Hokuto was.....!

It was the absolute trump card of Harutora and the others. No matter what they ran into, they could deal with it as long as they had Hokuto. This Tsuchimikado family dragon - in some sense, it 'spoiled' them.

Hokuto had instantly lost its ability to fight. Not only this, it was going to be stolen by the enemy. There was nothing that could dishearten Harutora and the others more.

...It was really no good.....

As he tightly gritted his teeth, Harutora angrily widened his eyes so much that the corner of his eyes almost split.

Their abilities were different. Their levels were different. With the difference between them and the enemy, they could only choose to give up. He was in a completely different dimension.

Touji clicked his tongue heavily. Kyouko's feet suddenly gave out, and Tenma sat on the stone stage with a plop. Even Suzuka was speechless.

The strong wind howled on the roof. The valiant Hokuto still hadn't given up, tossing around desperately. But the master had 'admitted defeat' before the captured dragon had surrendered. It wasn't just Natsume. Harutora was the same, and so were the others.

The principal helplessly clenched her fist.

But,

"No, no, Priest. An old man wouldn't steal a child's things."

A light voice naturally reached their ears for some reason on the rooftop amidst the howls of the strong wind.

Harutora and the other suddenly raised their heads, focusing their concentration on their ears.

Then--

A 'thump' sounded.

Thump, thump, thump, thump. The sound of footsteps came from the entrance to the roof. "Oh." Doman let out his most joyful voice since appearing before Harutora and the others.

Then,

"Ah, oh man. These stairs are tough on me. I have a fake leg, you know."

They heard a griping voice that was no different from usual, but they couldn't help but want to cry.

As he muttered to himself, he began climbing the stairs. Ohtomo, his head showing, looked at Doman, then turned to Harutora and the others, showing a smile mixed with bitterness and cordiality.

"Well..... To be honest, I want to turn back. Principal, I want overtime pay for this, alright?"

The principal smiled after hearing Ohtomo's words.

"Ohtomo-sensei? Isn't it still the lunch break right now?"

Chapter 5 - Competition of Magic

Part 1

The gray clouds covering the sky flowed dramatically, seeming to constantly increase in volume.

At the same time, Doman's shikigami that were scattered around the rooftop pranced around randomly while emitting hideous laughter. There was a dragon, still bound, and Harutora's group that was unable to flee from the barrier, along with the black-clothed Onmyouji who dominated the situation.

Under everyone's gaze, Ohtomo finished his difficult climb of the simple stairs, reaching the raised area.

After seeing the emerged Ohtomo, Harutora and the others were first astonished at his appearance. The normal Ohtomo always wore a rumpled suit, but it was different now.

He wore a full set of clothing, wearing a robe and hakama that made up a formal sokutai[10] - the so-called court attire.

Moreover, it was modern-styled court attire. There were several differences in the design, but overall it was extremely similar to the miasma protection garments of the Exorcist Bureau. The white clothing was the exact opposite of the opposing black clothing. It wasn't a black raven, but a white one, a pure white court outfit that gave off a solemn and holy air.

This was the Onmyouji's formal attire designated by the Onmyou Agency.

Ohtomo sighed, holding his cane with his right hand and lightly resting his body weight on the cane.

He turned his head and looked around:

"The view here is very open..... You could probably see Mount Fuji on a clear day."

The edges of his court attire flapped with the wind as he spoke leisurely.

"O, Ohtomo-sensei!"

"Oh, Harutora-kun. Sorry for coming late."

The court attire on his body was astonishing, but Ohtomo's speech and actions were exactly the same as always. Ohtomo looked at Harutora, Natsume, Touji, Kyouko, Tenma, and Suzuka in turn, then finally met the principal's gaze without a single word.

Then, he looked at the dragon trapped on the roof.

Hokuto had exhausted itself after struggling intensely and its giant body lay limply on the ground. The black web that the oni had turned into wound around its golden scales.

When he saw the dragon, a bitter smile flashed across the corners of Ohtomo's mouth.

Then, Ohtomo slowly looked straight at Doman.

Doman also looked at Ohtomo through his blood-red sunglasses. Then, Ohtomo straightened his back, bringing his fake right leg near his left leg and raising his chin slightly.

He looked slightly downwards, seeming not to want to look directly at Doman's face. He held his cane in his hand, his arms together, and then he raised them to his chest, his sleeves naturally drooping downwards.

"Priest."

He greeted Doman.

"I'm incredibly honored to meet you again. Do you still remember me?"

"Eh?" Harutora looked between the two in surprise.

He hadn't thought at all that Ohtomo had once met Doman, but the principal next to him wasn't surprised at all. She knew about this - at least, she held information to some degree.

The opposing Doman relaxedly affirmed it with a "Nnn."

"You made an extremely deep impression. I'm extremely sorry for pushing troubles to you after that farce some time ago."

"The Mystical Investigator incident, huh. That Kakugyouki really was your doing?"

"Ho, ho. It was to humor you. Take that man as a joke, that was probably the kind of level it was."

The black-clothed priest and the white-clothed teacher conversed attentively. Doman's replies weren't rude, but the surrounding shikigami were still ready to charge at any moment.

On the surface, the conversation of the two seemed calm and peaceful, but the surrounding atmosphere was tense enough to sting.

Ohtomo casually continued speaking.

"What happened to your friend from back then? He didn't come with you today?"

Doman hmphed after hearing Ohtomo's question.

"That person isn't my friend. We just happened to be acquainted. But he's a person with a strong sense of curiosity. Maybe he's hiding somewhere eavesdropping right now."

"I see. Unlike you, it seems that he's not related to the Twin-Horned Syndicate."

"What, you're going to analyze my words? Well, I indeed had a relationship of mutual assistance with that person, but this time it's at my own discretion."

"Oh? If I may be so rude, I heard that the Onmyou Agency was also driven into disarray by a certain person's shikigami?"

"Well, that was also the work of this old man. I didn't think that this would become a once-in-a-decade grand spectacle."

Doman cackled 'ke ke ke'. Harutora, who listened to the conversation from the side, couldn't help but be stunned.

...Th, This old man had simultaneously attacked the Onmyou Agency and the Onmyou Academy alone?

Harutora and the others had long since expected that the two incidents were associated. On that basis, they had judged that there might be multiple offenders - in other words, the Twin-Horned Syndicate.

But, if what Doman said was true, their judgments had been mistaken. After all, it had been hard to imagine before the fact that there would be a practitioner able to simultaneously attack two places on a large scale.

...This man really was a true monster.....

It was hard to imagine that the old man in front of him was a human like himself. No, he probably wasn't human.

But,

"Anyway, this old man has currently been exhausted to quite a degree. Isn't that right?"

Doman's tone was childlike, as if he were exposing his own prank. Harutora didn't get the meaning in his words for a while.

But, Doman continued speaking like he was joking around.

"Hence, my important defenders were all sent over there. At the least, your judgment has improved compared to the last time we met. Well, I don't need to say much, you must also realize it."

Harutora finally got the meaning of Doman's words.

...Eh? Wait, those words, could it be?

He was challenging Ohtomo?

Harutora quickly looked at the reactions of the people around him. Natsume by his side was also taken aback, as was Touji. As expected, Doman had 'revealed weakness' to Ohtomo and had pointed out a certain 'possibility'.

The 'possibility' that Ohtomo could 'win' against Doman.

"......At the time, you just single-mindedly escaped without allowing me to enjoy a fight. In the end you even left behind one of your legs."

Doman continued speaking to Ohtomo, who had no response. Harutora stared blankly again.

Before this, Harutora had never thought about the reason Ohtomo only had one leg. Even if he heard from the man himself that his leg had been taken by Doman, he wouldn't have believed him for some time. After all, judging from the current attitude and conversation between the two, it didn't feel like there had been such events between the two before at all.

Especially Ohtomo. He was very close to the opponent who had stolen one of his legs, but he didn't show impulsive emotions like anger, rage, or fear at all. Even

though the past disaster was clearly placed before him, his attitude still didn't change.

Harutora's judgment probably wasn't as good as Ohtomo's. But in Harutora's eyes, the current Ohtomo was more calm and natural than normal. He completely eliminated his human emotions, as if he were a priest facing a ritual, completely shedding his 'earthliness'.

"......'Courtesy'."

For some reason, the principal sighed lightly with a self-deprecating tone.

On the other hand, Doman, who had revealed his past incident, said:

"Of course, there's no reason for this old man to lie, right?"

Speaking with an even more pleasant mood:

"You wouldn't have been able to make that kind of judgment purely out of a sense of fear. You wouldn't have chosen to escape without hesitation if you weren't as calm as ice and stood on another level. Even more so for a practitioner like you."

The old man was expressionless, just cackling with a 'ke ke ke'. His laugh was enough to make one break out in a cold sweat, but Harutora still listened to his words raptly.

"Your true worth and this old man's true worth. On the basis of calm judgment, you still chose the strategy of 'escaping' even with sacrificing a leg. Honestly, your judgment was correct. An annoying yet admirable escape."

After hearing the legendary Onmyouji make this evaluation, Ohtomo still kept his calm. "......I am in awe", he thanked politely.

"This time won't be like the last. No, this old man won't let you escape again."

Doman brought his staff to his feet. In an instant, the old man's small body released an appalling aura.

"At the time, this old man hadn't treated you as an enemy, and that is why you were able to escape. But from a different perspective, your actions could be taken as giving up a sacrifice to keep your cards hidden. You didn't display any of your techniques in front of me, giving up a leg to escape. Doesn't that show that you had the intention of fighting this old man again? You allowed yourself to be wounded so that you could win the next time. Isn't that right?"

A young voice contrasting with his outer appearance, showing an excitement that he couldn't conceal. Just by hearing that remark, Harutora couldn't help but feel his heart speed up.

"Priest."

Ohtomo finally opened his mouth to reply.

Without any fear at all:

"I am still a novice. I just happened to foolishly do what I believed was correct."

"Don't be humble. There's no need to mask anything now."

"No, no. Those are my undisguised feelings."

"Hmph. .....Well, that's alright. At least you didn't deny it."

"....."

Ohtomo finally raised his head slowly.

His gaze met Doman's.

It was uncertain what the old man saw in Ohtomo's eyes, but he let out a bone-chilling laugh.

"I've been in this world for centuries..... Most things no longer excite me, and my heart rarely races. But perhaps I am still a child at heart, as showdowns of magic are still enough for me. After all, that is all that remains of this old man's spirit--"

Doman happily monologued as if he were talking to himself.

Ohtomo slowly parted his two hands.

The atmosphere between the two of them was rapidly filled with tension.

"......There's no problem."

Doman suddenly spoke first.

"You wouldn't abandon your disciples and escape. That's just what I want."

"Priest?"

Ohtomo's expression suddenly changed.

Doman returned his wrinkled left hand to the sleeve of his kimono, taking out a small sheet of metal from within. Even Ohtomo couldn't immediately identify what exactly it was.

"...After being given shape, you now become the master.[11] Shatter!"

Saying an incantation, he deftly flicked his wrist, throwing out the sheet of metal.

It came towards the altar.

"Uwah!"

Harutora unconsciously dodged. "Harutora-sama!" Kon shouted.

After the metal sheet touched the barrier, it easily embedded itself inside, spewing out the aura that it contained. In moments, the barrier covering the altar cracked.

"How is that possible!" Natsume, dumbfounded, thought of throwing charms again. But as she spoke, the barrier's cracks rapidly spread and in the end it completely disappeared.

The principal, who had created the barrier, was pale. The round mirror fell from her clothing, a sharp fissure across the surface.

"...Alpha's vessel?"

Everyone finally understood what exactly the metal sheet that Doman had thrown was after hearing those words. He had mentioned once that there was 'no reason to repair' Alpha and Omega's vessels. This was one of the fragments.

The two mechanical shikigami had been the principal's shikigami, carrying their master's aura. Doman had used the aura that the principal had left in the vessel to destroy the altar's barrier that the principal had created. He had used the practitioner's aura but had overwritten new magic on the vessel.

"Priest!"

"That's why I said there was no problem."

Doman laughed heartily.

"To this group of fledglings, it's too boring to simply stand on the sidelines. Moreover, I'll be very bored if we don't use our true abilities. .....Right, the altar happens to be here. Wouldn't it be a good show to just awaken Yakou here?"

The words Doman calmly said made everyone feel a vague anxiety.

Doman's shikigami all began moving upon seeing the barrier vanish. "You may go". Doman instructed his shikigami.

"Please have fun, everyone. This is a grand occasion."

Doman's words sounded as if he were singing. Ohtomo knocked the ground with his short cane with a thunk.

Silent sparks flashed between the black-clothed and white-clothed Onmyouji.

☆

"Bastard!"

Harutora cursed loudly.

...Awaken Yakou? What was he joking about!

After hearing Doman's words, a chill went through Harutora's spine. Of course, this was also a challenge to Ohtomo. But since this was something Doman said, there was the 'possibility' that it might become reality. In the case that Natsume really was used to awaken Yakou, what would he do when it happened? Honestly, Harutora had never considered.

"Calm down! Form a circle again!"

Touji shouted penetratingly.

Suzuka and Kon reacted immediately. Harutora and Natsume whose face had turned pale after hearing Doman's words, as well as Tenma, took out charms and the shakujou again a moment late. "Grandma!" Kyouko grabbed the principal, adding her to the circle of Harutora's group.

"Kyouko! Suzuka! I'm counting on you."

"Understood. --Hakuou! Kokfuu!"

After Harutora ordered, Kyouko called forth her two defensive shikigami again. Suzuka also nodded silently, focusing her mind to summon her remaining shikigami back. Even Hokuto started thrashing back and forth again after seeing its master's crisis.

"Harutora." Touji seemed to want to say something.

"No. You still can't fight!"

He knew that everyone was equally exhausted, but it was too dangerous to let Touji continue forcing himself to fight. Touji seemed to have some self-awareness and didn't recklessly transform, briefly replying to Harutora's warning with an "Ah".

To Touji, it was probably a huge humiliation that only he couldn't fight in a crucial situation. But this good friend wasn't an idiot who would place his companions in danger for his own pride.

"Sorry, I can't transform in the worst of situations. So..... Harutora, Natsume. When I release the seal next time, the two of you should take Yukikaze and escape straight to the Onmyou Agency - no, you should escape to the Exorcist Bureau. The closest branch from here is in Meguro."

"Touji!"

"Right now isn't the time to debate."

Touji sternly refused Harutora's rebuttal.

Touji's judgment was correct. Considering how Natsume might be used to awaken Yakou, right now they should evacuate her first.

".....Touji-san is correct."

The principal also approved Touji's opinion.

"If it comes to it, that's all we can do. If we find an opportunity, the two of you escape by yourselves without hesitating."

Harutora breathed "Principal", but the principal pretended not to hear. "Hakki! Kokurin!" After she commanded, two shikigami appeared next to the circle of Harutora's group.

The two heavy-duty shikigami possessed giant bodies similar to Doman's two oni. But the calm, lawful impression they gave off were just the opposite. These

were the 'Model G2 Emperors' that the Onmyou Agency created. They seemed to be the defensive shikigami that the principal controlled.

After seeing Harutora and the others entering a battle-ready state, Doman nodded his head in satisfaction.

"Let's get ready to move. ...Go."

Right as the words left his mouth, the shikigami who had received their master's approval charged out ahead, half towards the altar and the half towards Ohtomo.

But,

"Scatter!"

The moment Ohtomo shouted loudly, the shikigami about to attack them scattered in all directions.

First-class spirit language. By refining a strong and precise magical energy, he made his words interfere with the shikigamis' magic.

At the same time, Ohtomo quickly sprinted on his right fake leg.

There were complicated magical patterns on the front of the wooden fake leg. "Nnn". Doman formed a blade seal with one hand, swinging it at Ohtomo, but he was half a step slow. Ohtomo's image wavered, suddenly vanishing like a mirage.

Stealth magic, along with a magical movement method.

"Wind!"

Doman swiftly swung his blade seal. At the same time as he moved, black wind slashed out violently like viscous ink.

The black gale instantly covered half of the roof.

But,

"Order!"

Ohtomo's voice sounded from somewhere and a charm flew into the front of the gale.

A fire-element charm.

'Wind' belonged to either wood or metal[12], and Ohtomo had instantly seen that the black wind carried metal aura. Fire conquers metal. Based on the five-element relative weaknesses, the black wind was ignited by the charm's flame. The battle between the fire and wind made the roof air shake violently.

"There!"

Doman formed a seal in front of his eyes, and Ohtomo appeared next to Harutora and the others. The light of the fire was clearly reflected on his white sokutai as it flapped with the wind.

Ohtomo lost his balance slightly while sliding to a stop in front of Harutora and the others. In an instant, the positions had been switched. Guarding the altar behind him, he confronted Doman again.

"Oh--"

"Ohtomo-sensei!"

Natsume couldn't speak out of agitation, but Harutora inadvertently shouted. But Ohtomo didn't say anything extra, looking back over his shoulder at the students behind his back.

After rapidly checking the conditions of everyone,

"...Suzuka-kun."

He called out Suzuka's name.

Suzuka, who had been called, dumbfoundedly looked at Ohtomo and Doman's contest. Since her knowledge was more abundant than the others', she was able to

understand the magic and the skills of the two, and their levels were quite high. Her body couldn't help but tremble the moment she was called out to, then she stood next to Ohtomo as if feeling angry at her cowardice.

Before Suzuka spoke up:

"Stand still, don't move--"

As he spoke, Ohtomo put his right hand on the corner of his mouth.

He bit his fingertip with his teeth, then slowly reached his finger towards Suzuka's head.

"Hey!"

Suzuka unconsciously wanted to lean back, but she stopped moving after a glance from Ohtomo. An intense gaze shot out from the eyes behind his glasses.

Ohtomo chanted a long incantation in a single breath.

Pushing aside Suzuka's bangs, he drew a line on her forehead with his fingertip.

No, he had erased the fine 'X' mark on Suzuka's forehead. He had covered the magic sealing her magical energy with his own blood.

In that moment, Suzuka's eyes suddenly widened to an incredible degree. Even Harutora could clearly 'see'. The aura that had always been in a suppressed state until now was spilling forth from the girl's small body like a flood.

"No way!"

Dairenji shouted.

"You released the magic? Impossible. How could you do that? Did you really release it? Kurahashi Genji's seal?"

Suzuka questioned as if it frightened her. A bitter smile flashed over Ohtomo's face.

Using his tongue to lick off the blood remaining on his fingertip,

"I just plugged the sealed gap with a fake magic. Well, it's probably something like a cheat. It's an improvisation, only effective for a short time."

After Ohtomo explained it simply, his gaze immediately returned to Doman. Suzuka was speechless after hearing Ohtomo's explanation.

Anyway, Ohtomo hadn't broken the seal on Suzuka, he had just used a 'cheat' to temporarily reduce the magical energy limitation. That was the so-called 'magic hacking'.

But this kind of magic was even higher level than forcibly breaking the seal. After all, the person who had placed the seal on Suzuka as punishment was the Onmyou Agency Chief Kurahashi Genji - the principal's son, Kyouko's father, and a first-rate Onmyouji belonging to the Twelve Divine Generals.

More importantly, in order to keep Suzuka, who was a National First-Class Onmyouji herself - and a 'specialist in magic research' - from breaking the seal, he had undertaken special procedures while placing the seal. It absolutely wasn't a simple task to hack this magic on the spot and temporarily render it useless. At least Suzuka hadn't met anyone who could do it.

"Wh-Who exactly are you?"

"A past Mystical Investigator who's currently an academy teacher."

Ohtomo replied leisurely after hearing Suzuka's dumbfounded question.

Just then,

"I understand that your intent is to buy time, but I'll be disappointed if you drag this out too long."

Doman threw his staff in the air after he said this.

The staff suddenly vibrated in the air, sounding with a noise similar to splitting wood and becoming pieces. No, upon careful observation one could notice that it

hadn't broken, it had split vertically. The cane became hundreds of thin, sharp spears. Ohtomo's expression immediately went taut and he lowered his center of gravity.

He kneeled one leg on the ground, standing his own cane in front of him. After a 'thunk' sound rang out from the cane, it stood by itself without moving.

Doman's staff changed to countless spears, attacking the altar like rain.

"Rin, Pyou, Tou, Sha, Kai, Jin, Retsu, Zai, Zen --!"

Ohtomo formed kuji seals at a speed that eyes couldn't keep up with, infusing magical energy into the cane standing in front of him. The magic diffused out from the cane, beginning to form a defensive wall of magical energy.

The countless flying spears were blocking in midair by the defensive wall.

"It's not over!"

With Doman's shout as a signal, the blocked spears became a group of snakes, biting through the magical defensive wall and continuing to advance.

Facing this, Ohtomo rapidly formed a hand seal again.

"...ひがしやまつぼみがはらのさわらびのおもいをしらぬかわすれたか..." [13]

He chanted an incantation, focusing on praying. Ohtomo's short cane vibrated constantly, suddenly releasing a pulse similar to ultrasonic waves.

The group of snakes' movements suddenly stopped. They spasmed and spat blood, falling to the roof. The instant they touched the concrete, the snakes returned to wooden spears - pieces of wood that had lost their magical energy - and then emitted brown smoke, collapsing into ash.

A clash of magic that he had never seen before. "I see, snake-repelling magic." After Doman saw his attack be blocked, he became even more pleased. Harutora and the others were dumbfounded.

The countless wisps of smoke emitted from the wooden pieces were blown away by the strong wind on the roof.

Ohtomo didn't become careless. Still watching Doman:

".....Everyone's alright, I see. It looks like you're all very tired, but I don't have the leisure to protect you from here on out. Please protect yourselves as much as possible. Have the principal command you and have Suzuka be the vanguard, with the others assisting from the side."

Ohtomo instructed them calmly, his tone not containing the fluted sound it had before this magical battle. Harutora and the others had never heard Ohtomo's words be so serious before.

"Don't be scared by the number of shikigami and always be alert of your surroundings. Control the state of the battlefield. The worst situation is if you get pulled into things."

His tone was as if he were cautioning them before guiding them through a hike, but Harutora unconsciously shuddered when he heard it.

From those calm words, he seemed to be able to see that Ohtomo had passed through countless battlefields - 'hells'. A 'demonic' air born from overcoming repeated hells indeed came off from his body.

...Compared to this person, I.....

He didn't know anything about Ohtomo Jin as an 'Onmyouji'. That kind of feeling suddenly spilled forth in Harutora's heart. His companions were probably feeling similar things.

".....Ah, also, Natsume-kun."

"Yes."

"Take your dragon back."

Ohtomo and Doman glared at each other, almost as if they had trouble moving their mouths. He barely managed to let out a voice that was audible.

To Natsume, whose expression had changed:

"I'll create an opportunity, so you dematerialize it. But you have to carefully consider whether you allow it to return to the battlefield. You're almost at your limits. The more you come close to your limits, the more openings you'll show."

After saying this, Ohtomo strode forth on his fake leg and stood.

"Okay."

Doman said:

"Why don't you attack this time."

"......Then."

Ohtomo opened the palms of his hands at the same time as he replied. There were eight charms gotten from who knew where between the ten fingers of his left and right hands.

"Five element transformation, charm dance - Order!"

There were two wood-element, fire-element, metal-element, and water-element charms each. They weren't created by the Onmyou Agency, as evidenced by the fact that Harutora and the others revealed expressions of never having seen them before when they saw the charms.

First were the two metal-element charms. They became two dazzling blades and flew at Doman. Doman formed a seal, producing black wind from below his feet that swirled into a typhoon and deflected the blades.

The deflected blades dripped densely with water droplets, like the water vapor in the air was condensing on their surfaces. After they were strengthened by the two water-element charms, the water droplets converged into a flow, descending towards the roof like a waterfall and spilling towards Doman's location while splashing intensely.

Doman's small body was lifted up by the black wind. Now, the vine-like branches extended from the water flow to pursue Doman who had escaped into the air.

The wood-element charm. The vines born from the two charms absorbed the water spreading over the rooftop, and hence suddenly lengthened in a flash, crisscrossing and branching into the sky, their shape like two extended hands with five fingers grabbing at the enemy. They constantly grew, with the black-clothed Doman as their target.

Then, the moment that the vines completely absorbed the water, the two fire-element charms exploded.

The vines, which had already grown into giant trees, were instantly buried in flames. The wind fed the force of the fire and it roared. Heat swept over the rooftop, and the many Doman's shikigami on the side were caught, burning into nothingness. If the principal hadn't quickly ordered the two 'Emperors' to act as shields, Harutora and the others probably wouldn't have survived either.

"Five element mutual generation.....!'

Suzuka, who stared intently at the magic battle, shouted breathlessly.

Metal birthed water, water birthed wood, wood birthed fire, fire birthed earth. Those were the roots that Onmyoudou was based on - magic of the 'Onmyou Five Elements'. Moreover, Ohtomo had superimposed these transformations over each other, further strengthening their power.

The blinding blaze released light, shining strongly at Doman from below his feet. The vines that tried to grab Doman like two hands swiftly became two fists of flame to attack him.

But in this kind of situation, Doman still laughed joyfully.

"Hoho, so much effort. In this case..."

He moved his withered finger at the blaze in front of him.

A distinctive, ink-like seal emerged in the empty space in front of him. Simultaneously, the black wind supporting Doman swirled into an eddy, becoming black fluid, forming a waterfall, and flowing at the raging flames. With a sudden roar that sounded like the world was ending, black steam spewed in all directions.

The black wind carried metal aura, which birthed water according to the relationships of the five elements, and water conquered fire. It was like he were deliberately doing the same thing back to Ohtomo - more accurately, it was a magical etiquette similar to writing poems to reply to poems.[14]

Ohtomo's magic had been strengthened three times, but Doman's magic still overcame it.

The raging fire was engulfed in the black waterfall and simply vanished into nothing. Moreover, the water that hadn't been depleted descended in waves towards Ohtomo.

Ohtomo took out another charm, throwing it above his head.

"Quell the black water magic, Order!"

It was the earth-element charm that he hadn't used just now. No, he hadn't not used it, he had predicted the scene before him and deliberately preserved it. The earth-element charm released earth aura above Ohtomo's head, forming a defensive wall. Earth conquers water. Ohtomo's magical defense could suppress Doman's waterfall.

But it couldn't completely block it. Doman's magic was too strong.

"Ah!"

The defensive wall's strength was continuously eroded, and the black waterfall rushed towards Ohtomo.

"Sensei!"

Harutora unconsciously leaned forward. "Idiot!" Touji hastily grabbed on to Harutora's arm. The water also rushed towards the altar where Harutora and the others were. Suzuka hastily put up a simple barrier, barely protecting the safety of her companions, but she didn't have the leisure to look after Ohtomo.

But,

"Hmm?"

Doman, still floating in the air, let out an astonished sound.

"Why is there still one left?"

The moment after Doman brought up the question.

"Order!"

Ohtomo, who had been caught in the black water, pressed the final earth-element charm - the last of the eight total that had been prepared - on the concrete roof.

The location was next to the trapped Hokuto.

Doman unconsciously shouted out, but even he couldn't make it in time. The concrete cracked and a corner of the roof collapsed, crumbling. Of course, there was also Hokuto and Doman's oni. Hokuto was stunned, looking around in a fluster. ...Eh?

In a split second,

"Natsume-san!"

"Yes!"

After hearing the principal's sharp reminder, Natsume also made a prompt decision. While Ohtomo and Doman in front of her had repeatedly carried out their dazzling magic battle, Natsume had obediently waited for the 'opportunity' her class's teacher had mentioned.

"Hokuto, return!"

The instant the concrete collapsed, the web formed by the oni binding Hokuto relaxed and showed an opening because they had lost their foothold. Since it was a physical opening, it was also a magical opening. Natsume grabbed on to that instant, forcefully releasing Hokuto's materialization.

The dragon's giant body instantly vanished, only leaving the empty net of oni, which swiftly disappeared out of sight with the force of the collapse, along with the rubble and the black water.

"We did it!"

Natsume cheered loudly. It seemed that they had safely taken Hokuto back.

On the other hand, Ohtomo who had outmaneuvered Doman managed to take hold of the opening he had made, finally escaping from the force of the water.

"...Really."

He complained while lifting his fake leg, standing up.

"Honestly, just give me a break. I was only ever good at those kind of lies, bluffs, and those kinds of tricks....."

Ohtomo complained with a bitter face, adjusting his glasses.

Doman, who had escaped to float in the air, descended to the roof again.

"What a very annoying man. Well, what other tricks do you have?"

Doman asked excitedly. Ohtomo looked back at the old man without displeasure.

But, just then.

Doman suddenly turned his attention.

Without any prior warning,

"...What?"

He murmured quietly while staying motionless, slightly moving his gaze with a manner as if he were hearing sounds from far away. A strange expression emerged on even Ohtomo who confronted him.

Those actions continued for a while, and then Doman looked at the altar where Harutora and the others were again.

To the principal,

"......It seems that you were sincere. I am quite surprised that what you said is true."

Harutora and the others didn't understand the meaning in his words. But the principal immediately got it.

"A report from your shikigami? That's great. ...After all, I explained several times that it wasn't here anymore. Priest, your actions are no help and will not result in anything."

The principal announced flatly. Doman look at her angrily, letting out a regretful croon.

But, he immediately sighed:

"......Hmph, no matter. In that case, there's one less trouble to worry about later. I can concentrate on the situation 'here'."

"Priest?"

The principal was taken aback, shouting angrily. But Doman didn't mind her, seeming to completely lose his interest in the people at the altar, returning his gaze to Ohtomo.

"What now?"

He strengthened his tone and urged Ohtomo, wanting to begin the magic battle again - the 'competition of magic' that Doman spoke of. Doman's attitude made the principal grit her teeth.

On the other hand, Ohtomo didn't respond immediately.

"....."

He silently watched Doman. "What's wrong?" Doman seemed to speak a bit restlessly.

"You're still stalling for time at this point? If you don't attack, then I--"

Doman's words suddenly stopped and he suddenly formed a seal with one hand, swinging it at Ohtomo.

Buzz-- 'Lag' appeared on Ohtomo's body and his image suddenly disappeared, replaced by a small charm. After dematerializing, it floated lightly down to the roof.

It was a simple shikigami.

When Doman's attention had been diverted, Ohtomo had hidden himself and used a body double.

"Hoho. I really can't be careless! .....Where are you?"

Doman rapidly checked the surroundings, pointing towards an area and instructing "Go" to a nearby shikigami. The commanded shikigami leaped to the position Doman indicated, and the hidden Ohtomo appeared in front of the shikigami.

Ohtomo rapidly twisted his body, dodging the shikigami's attack and rolling on the roof, jumping up to stand. His movements were agile enough to make it hard to believe he had a fake leg - moreover, a wooden fake leg. The movement technique he had applied on himself at the start was still in effect.

Ohtomo had used stealth to buy some time and shred a charm.

He kneeled one leg on the ground, holding the shredded charm in his two hands.

"...Om Marici Sowaka..."

Along with his Marici[15] mantra, he exhaled a breath, scattering the charm.

The senior deity of the sun, Marici, symbolized control of stealth. The charm that should have been scattered by the wind vanished after leaving Ohtomo's hands as if it had been absorbed by the air.

On the other hand,

"What a trick-loving man."

Doman extended his hands, his left and right making different motions and simultaneously drawing two magic seals.

"Then this old man will use a big move."

The magic seals started pulsing, trembling, swelling, and taking shape in the air to become hellish monsters. One was an oni with a bull's head, and the other was an oni with a horse's face.

The only significant difference between the newly-appeared oni and the ones that had bound Hokuto was that they were no longer simple shikigami. They gave off an inauspicious true demonic aura.

"How can that be!"

"R, Real oni!"

Natsume and Kyouko shouted with ashen faces. Suzuka also murmured "is this for real" shakily, then put up a simple double barrier when she came to her senses.

"Wh, What. Real oni - 'Type-Ogres'?"

No one replied to Harutora's question. There had been a case in the past where one person created spiritual disasters. If it were Ashiya Doman, it wouldn't be too strange even if he could instantly create Phase 3 mobile spiritual disasters.

But, Doman laughed with a 'ke ke ke'.

"As I explained already, my guards were all sent to the Onmyou Agency. These are just shadows. If we judge them by your standards, they're probably a three, or maybe closer to a four?"

Right as the words left his mouth, the demonic aura that the two oni spewed out began to disrupt the surrounding aura balance.

The uneven aura in the air rapidly turned into yin aura. After the aura became unbalanced to a certain degree, it became miasma, floating through the roof like a poisonous gas.

The black shikigami that touched the miasma began increasing in strength. Among them, there were shikigami that absorbed the shikigami and even shikigami that gave off miasma themselves.

The scale wasn't large, and it counted as a small-scale spiritual disaster, but it wasn't an early stage. This had reached the Hyakki Yagyou, which generated spiritual disasters in a chain reaction - a Phase 4.

"This is bad!"

Suzuka unconsciously shouted out.

The 'Child Prodigy' strengthened the barrier again. After her magical energy limitations had been momentarily released, Suzuka could use her full power. But

In the end, she was a researcher, she didn't have experience purifying spiritual disasters, and she only had basic knowledge regarding methods for dealing with them.

For now, she took out the scripture she used to create shikigami. She didn't make the pages in it into vessels, but utilized them to make protective charms instead. By throwing out all of the protective charms, she planned on using a magical defensive wall to block off the miasma. The principal also threw protective charms that she had carried. Natsume, Kyouko, Harutora, Touji, and even Tenma also emulated their methods.

Harutora's group resisted the billowing miasma with all their power.

But in the end, it was only the 'repercussions' that were attacking them.

"Then, how will you cope with this?"

Ohtomo returned a sharp gaze to Doman's unyielding challenge.

Facing the approaching bull-headed and horse-faced oni along with the group of shikigami-turned-spiritual disasters, he threw out five charms.

Rapidly taking a deep breath:

"God of the east sea, Amei. God of the west sea, Shukuryou. God of the south sea, Kyojou. God of the north sea, Gukyou. Gods of the four seas, fend off a hundred demons and drive back the fierce disaster. Order!"

He chanted an incantation in a penetrating shout.

The five thrown charms suddenly glowed, emitting beams of light and linking with each other. A magical seal of light shone in front of Ohtomo - a pentagram. Under the illumination of this brightly shining aura, the oni and shikigami shrieked loudly and covered their eyes.

This wasn't General Onmyoudou, but rather a secret art to fend off a Hyakki Yagyou that was part of the Imperial Onmyoudou that Yakou had created. As the

movements of the oni and shikigami became slow, Ohtomo took out an object from his clothes, placing it at his feet.

It was small enough to hold in his hand.

Small rocks wrapped in bamboo leaves.

"What?" Doman, upon seeing this object, made a stunned sound.

"Could it be - No, a bamboo cage?"

Ohtomo didn't reply to Doman's question, taking out another small folded piece of paper from his clothes. The furrow was filled with a pinch of salt.

With the shining pentagram as a shield, Ohtomo scattered the salt on the stones wrapped in bamboo leaves.

Then,

"By the green of these bamboo leaves, by the withering of these bamboo leaves, let green die! And by the drought of this salt, wither! And by the weight of these rocks, sink!"

The chanted incantation was filled with a terrible ominous air, vastly different from before.

Magic started up as summoned by the incantation. A dark light filled the sky like raging flame while flaring over Doman's head.

It was the pieces of the charm that had been blown around just now. Using stealth magic to fool the enemy's sight had been to allow these pieces to spread above the enemy.

The pieces of the charm shone like bulbs, constantly vibrating in bursts and becoming even brighter. The light of the light sources overlapped, rapidly spreading as if to weave a spider web. Finally, it formed a dome-like shape to cover Doman. He was trapped in a thick gridded cage.

Then, an intense magical energy howled inside the cage.

A cruel and ferocious yin aura, enough to make one shiver just by 'seeing' it from the altar. An ominous magical energy filled the cage like a pathological weapon, and a hot wind even more scorching than flame raged inside the place with nowhere to hide.

It would curse, burn, and tear the object sealed in the cage. The environment was like a scorching hell, so miserable that one couldn't bear to look.

The oni and shikigamis' actions became disordered upon seeing their master's crisis. Even Harutora's group that watched from the side was the same way. They were silent, their backs cold as they stood still shuddering.

But,

"Could this be!"

Doman's voice came from the magic cage.

The old man burst out laughing, not concealing his excited mood.

"Could this be the 'Eight Item Bamboo Basket Curse'!? You can't find such an ancient curse in even Imperial Onmyoudou. You even modified it and made it stronger, probably just to increase the surprise! Hahaha! Very good! You've surpassed this old man's expectations!"

A young man's laugh came from the old man's mouth, but it no longer resembled human speech. Harutora and the others felt like their bodies were being immersed in an ice bath as they trembled inside.

"Even this old man doesn't know how to 'deal with' this curse. No, I've heard that removing the cursing tools will do, but this old man can't reach the cursing tools over there, so I can't contend from inside the cursed cage! Ke, ke, ke, ke. What a vicious magic! In this case, this old man will also go all out. It's indeed very tacky to do this, but let's speak using absolute strength!"

Doman's roar rumbled.

A shockingly huge aura overflowed from the old man's small body.

The curse cage was instantly filled with Doman's aura. Even so, the movements of the released aura didn't stop. The cage had originally been filled with the magical energy released by the curse, and with Doman's aura now, the spiritual pressure elevated rapidly.

"Hey! .....I, Is that for real!?"

Suzuka inadvertently cried out. Kon's ears and tail stood up straight.

It was like a bomb whose fuse had been lit. Moreover, they had nowhere to run and could only stand in place watching. Not only Suzuka but even the principal and Natsume were the same. Touji, Kyouko, and Tenma too.

Of course, Harutora was also included.

He trembled.

His hair stood on end.

...Eh?

Harutora suddenly realized something.

He was incredibly calm.

...Right.

He suddenly thought of it.

He was trembling and his hair was standing on end.

Simultaneously, something inside him was excited.

What was up with this? The fight playing out in front of him was unquestionably first-class, a high-level magic battle that Harutora had never imagined at all

before. This was the so-called 'competition of magic'. When he had seen Kogure's actions on TV and felt Kagami's pressure first-hand, his excited feelings hadn't been as inflated as they were now. He was excited to an abnormal level, as if the view of the world as he knew it had been inverted.

Of course he would be scared and fearful.

But there were other emotions above those. He was trembling on the inside and his blood was boiling, things that he definitely wouldn't experience in other situations.

...This was .....

This was magic.

He had seen those who had already climbed to the 'peak' of this world, or perhaps one could say he was looking up at the 'heights' in the distance.

Exactly what kind of world was it over there?

".....Ban, Un, Taraku, Kiriku, Aku!"

Ohtomo drew a pentagram while chanting a mantra, strengthening the pentagram used to combat Hyakki Yagyou.

Even Harutora's eyes could see that Ohtomo's magic was incredibly high level. But the difference on the magical energy aspect was too great when compared with Doman's aura that swelled inside the cage. It wasn't a matter of technique, but a difference in total power. A discrepancy of overwhelming 'strength'.

"Sensei!"

Natsume shouted with a hoarse voice. Harutora didn't say a thing, his mind completely focused on the 'competition of magic' in front of him. He had already lost the energy to speak.

Finally,

"Break!"

Doman extended his arms towards Ohtomo.

The magic bamboo cage that Ohtomo had woven shattered and the aura and magical energy shut inside suddenly spewed out like a bursting dam - no, it should be described as a flood after heavy rain. It swiftly and forcefully hit the pentagram Ohtomo had spread out.

The pentagram flashed intensely and Ohtomo quickly extended his fake leg, kicking away the magical tool beneath his feet - the small rocks wrapped in bamboo leaves. But the magical energy Doman released didn't decrease at all. In the next moment, the pentagram constructed with five charms would be defeated and be struck flying.

But,

The actions Ohtomo took in that brief wait betrayed Doman's expectations, needless to say Harutora and the others'.

The moment of time that the pentagram bought was more precious than a mountain of gold. A normal practitioner would waste his valuable time putting up a new defensive wall or dodging with all his power.

But Ohtomo didn't do this.

"Antari on, sokumetsu soku, birariya birari, sokume tsumei, zansaki mei, zanki sei, zandai hion, shikan shiki jin, atara un, on ze so, zanzan birarai, aun, zetsu mei, soku zetsu, un, zanzan dari, zan dari han tsu." [16]

This incantation seemed excessively long, but Ohtomo chanted it without hesitation. Just as the words left his mouth, the pentagram was struck away and he sank into the assaulting magical energy. In order to finish his magic,

Clap!

He brought his hands together.

This was a Taoist system of internal attack from Imperial Onmyoudou.

Ohtomo's magical energy passed through space,

Bang!

It burst on Doman's body, producing a frightening physical impact.

The old man's small body twisted and broke. Simultaneously, Ohtomo was also engulfed by Doman's magical energy. This was no longer desperation, this was giving up his life to win - giving the killing blow while realizing that both sides would suffer. Natsume and Kyouko wailed.

The high-density typhoon of aura, magical energy, and miasma swept across the roof. The defensive wall Suzuka had put up shook like a flag in a storm.

An incredibly tense, heavy, and lengthy moment.

Then--

After the storm of magical energy passed, two figures still remained on the roof.

Part 2

Which side had been victorious?

That speculation felt suffocating to Harutora.

The black-clothed Onmyouji, who stood in place like a broken scarecrow.

The white-clothed Onmyouji, who stood unmoving, still with his hands clasped.

It was the latter who moved first. Ohtomo staggered to the ground and supported himself with one hand, as if he had expended his energy. Harutora swallowed, and Natsume sobbed. In moments, Ohtomo's hair had lost its color.

But the white-haired Ohtomo still lived. He was dying in front of Harutora and the others' eyes, but he still hadn't lost his fighting spirit. He struggled to raise his head, plucking off his cracked glasses and looked at Doman with gritted teeth.

His eyes flashed,

".....As expected."

He murmured.

A smile still emerged on his mouth in his dying state.

"I thought this might be the case before. Now I can finally confirm it completely. You aren't a human, you're an ara-mitama[17]."

A twisted, broken body, four unnaturally distorted limbs, broken red sunglasses, and empty eyes. This was no longer a corpse-like old man, it was a true corpse of an old man.

But the old man's corpse:

"Ho."

Replied.

It was a surreal scene. The old man corpse that couldn't possibly stand anymore didn't fall as it slowly swayed. It opened its mouth to speak and even laughed.

Its mummy-like body didn't bleed. A "Ke-- ke--" resounded from its torn throat, a 'voice' like wind blowing through a hole.

"You forcefully adopted such reckless strategies just to confirm that? Ho. Delightful, delightful. This old man is already taken with you. You're the first since Yakou to make me feel this way."

Doman laughed 'Ke-- ke--'.

Kyouko, behind Harutora, had also started wailing. Harutora couldn't speak up to console Kyouko upon seeing her unable to suppress her sobs. The overly 'monstrous' scene before them made his thoughts go blank and his body and soul were completely paralyzed.

After Kyouko, even Natsume also seemed to want to vomit. Suzuka, who controlled the barrier, gritted her teeth.

Doman, still laughing 'Ke-- ke--', said:

"I'm much obliged to be called a 'mitama' by you. After all, this old man is just the product of an unorthodox method. To those who do not understand, I look similar..... but this old man is different from that person--"

Upon careful 'observation', the aura exuding from Doman's body hadn't weakened at all. Aura constantly poured from his dilapidated body - or more accurately, from the space around his body. It wasn't that his 'body' carried aura, but rather his 'aura' resided within the body. The aura was his real body, and the person was an accessory. If the affiliated person was dying - or in other words, even if he was already dead, his aura was still alive.

As Doman spoke, Ohtomo slowly stood up.

His snow-white hair blew in the wind. Ohtomo's composure still didn't diminish while being surrounded by oni and shikigami or as the originally dead Doman talked to him.

After plucking off his glasses, Ohtomo's eyes stared intently at Doman, as bright as if they were releasing magic themselves. In contrast to his swaying body, his inner will was indomitable.

"Well."

Doman continued speaking.

"Your name?"

"...Ohtomo Jin."

"Good to meet you. Onmyouji Ohtomo Jin. Why don't you join the side of this old man? Magic is an extremely deep, extremely beautiful, extremely lovable thing. You can definitely understand. Well, don't stop at peering down into the

abyss of magic, throw yourself and fall in - only then can you feel joy. An unmatchable bliss."

His emotional words were at the same time extremely deep. Just by hearing them, one couldn't help but tremble and almost lose balance.

But Ohtomo's reply was unusually clear.

"My apologies, but I must refuse."

He stood tall, interrupting magnificently.

It wasn't aura, but something more like 'dignity' swelled in his body.

"Ashiya Doman, don't try to trick me. Even if I am near death, I won't fall for the sweet talk and deception of a withered old man. I may be rude, but I hope that you would be gracious and let us go."

He spoke with fortitude. Harutora was deeply drawn in by his strong figure.

"Hmph, ho, ho, ho."

Doman laughed. The old man's body suddenly leaned back and spasmed constantly, as if it were a hanging puppet.

"How arrogant! I definitely won't forgive you, Ohtomo Jin! Observe this old man defeating your arrogance!"

An appalling aura once again spewed from the old man's corpse. Though Doman had denied it himself, this power could only make one think of mitama - 'gods'.

"Ha." But, Ohtomo laughed.

Then, he reached into his clothes, taking out several charms. Shikigami charms. He threw them into the air, flipping the sleeve of his robe.

The shikigami quickly materialized, appearing bright blue in the gray sky. Birds. Their designs were different from mechanical shikigami like the 'Yaksha' and 'Emperor'. Rather, they were blue swallows, as lifelike as living creatures.

"Ah!"

Tenma shouted.

This was the binding shikigami 'WA1 Swallow Whip' manufactured by the Witchcraft Corporation. It was well-received by many Mystical Investigators as the masterpiece of the Witchcraft Corporation.

It was a shikigami buyable on the market.

"You!"

Doman roared angrily.

"You spit rhetoric at me, yet you still ridicule this competition of magic!"

Doman's roar was like splitting thunder.

But, Ohtomo said:

"No, no, old man."

He face him with a light smile.

"The idea that it only counts as taking it seriously if you have to use shikigami you made yourself is only pretentious and self-righteous. That's how it is. Historical geniuses like Priest are another matter, but mortals have their own methods. Using mass-produced products is one of them."

Ohtomo smiled at Doman.

Returning to his usual Kansai accent,

"And I don't remember saying that I would have a 'magic competition' with you."

The blue group of swallows flew independently over his head.

Suddenly, small feathers began dropping from their wings.

Every time a swallow flapped its wings, feathers would fall like petals. They swayed lightly in the wind, dancing above the academy building rooftop.

This fantastic scene was as if the intense magical battle up to now had all been an illusion. Harutora and the others raised their heads to look up, looking in a daze.

The flying blue feathers continuously fell to the roof.

They touched the horn of the bull-headed oni, the shoulder of the horse-faced oni, the bodies of the shikigami, and Doman. As if they were snowflakes, they felt weightless. Once the feathers almost devoid of magical energy touched them, they disappeared with lag.

An unreal, fantastic scene, making one forget that this was a battle of life and death.

"......What are you planning?"

Doman asked Ohtomo, somewhat displeased - but at the same time somewhat curious.

"I said just now. When I said 'as expected'."

Ohtomo replied, his expression as if a heavy burden had been removed from him.

"If I can confirm that my opponent is 'spiritual disaster-like', I have my own methods of fighting. Eye-catching actions like announcing your attack are counterproductive in the end. ...Well, the situation just now was so tense my heart almost stopped."

Ohtomo exaggerated. Doman as well as Harutora and the others felt wonder upon seeing the white-clothed Onmyouji's attitude.

Just then, there was a slight reaction around Harutora's left eye - on the pentagram drawn below it.

Then,

...Eh?

Harutora noticed it.

Behind Harutora, in an extremely distant area.

Under the cloudy sky, in the direction of Shibuya street,

-Flicker-

A point of light lit up.

A fire.

Moreover:

".....Ah, what's that?'

"H-Harutora-sama! Over there--!"

"Wait, there too!"

There wasn't just one. On the left, on the right, and behind. Five fires in total were lit in the distance of their boundless view, several hundred meters away. Their locations were very high, probably on rooftops, and the distance to each of them were similar. They surrounded the academy building at a distance.

Doman also noticed these fires. Then, he thought of the 'meaning' that this arrangement possessed faster than Harutora's group.

Turning to look at Ohtomo:

"You!"

"...Yes. I don't abide by the rules. I set you up."

With Ohtomo's words as a signal, stately auras emerged around the five fires.

The aura was infused into the flame and became magical energy, shooting into the sky and spilling forth mightily. Then, from one area to another, they drew out clear lines of magical energy as if to cut open the densely clouded sky.

These were the movable altars that the Exorcist Bureau had set up. The burning flame on the altar infused spiritual power into a line of magical energy. The magical energy lines formed by the five altars released a beautiful light, drawing a giant magic seal in the sky.

It reached a radius of several hundred meters with the academy building as the center. At the same time, the chanted incantation of an exorcist from a distant location even reached the academy roof.

" ...On kirikushuchiribikiri tadanouun sarabashatorodashaya satanbayasatanbaya sohatasohatasowaka... Onshuchiri kyararoha unkensowaka ...On kirikushuchiribikiri tadanouun sarabashatorodashaya satanbayasatanbaya sohatasohatasowaka... Onshuchiri kyararoha unkensowaka ...On kirikushuchiribikiri tadanouun sarabashatorodashaya satanbayasatanbaya sohatasohatasowaka... Onshuchiri kyararoha unkensowaka ...On kirikushuchiribikiri tadanouun sarabashatorodashaya satanbayasatanbaya sohatasohatasowaka... Onshuchiri kyararoha unkensowaka ...On kirikushuchiribikiri tadanouun sarabashatorodashaya satanbayasatanbaya sohatasohatasowaka... Onshuchiri kyararoha unkensowaka ...On kirikushuchiribikiri tadanouun sarabashatorodashaya satanbayasatanbaya sohatasohatasowaka... Onshuchiri kyararoha unkensowaka"

This was a great magic of esoteric Buddhism system, the Yamantaka method, which was a prayer pledging oneself to Yamantaka[18] in order to bring calamity to one's worst enemies.

The magical energy released from five directions enlarged the pentagram, forming a strong magic. Then, by the lead of the Swallow Whips that Ohtomo used, the magic seal centered itself to face the academy building. Of course, it didn't aim at Ohtomo and Harutora and the others who were on the same roof. Rather it attacked Doman's group that had been 'touched by the swallows' feathers'.

Harutora and the others' visions were suddenly painted completely white by the magical energy.

The shikigami-turned-spiritual-disasters were purified.

Then, the bull-headed and horse-faced oni vanished like steam.

Then,

"I've blundered!"

Doman shouted.

"But, you're too naive. Your Yamantaka method is crude and hasty, and the magic shows signs of distorting as it converges. You're far from 'purifying' this old man!"

Doman's analysis was correct. The Yamantaka method of General Onmyoudou required sufficient preparation time along with adequate equipment and personnel. The magic Ohtomo had prepared this time was not sufficient in any of these areas.

But, Ohtomo himself knew of these circumstances. He pulled his expression taut again, forcing himself to move and forming seals with both hands - Daidokko seals. Then, he agilely moved his fake leg, enhancing his movement method.

"On aku un!"

He charged forward in a flash, chanting the mantra of the Yamantaka method.

Ohtomo's flesh was enchanted by magic, becoming a sharp arrow that pierced towards Doman. There was no strategy or tricks, it was a pure collision of bodies. Ohtomo's momentum carried Doman past the altar where Harutora and the others were, to the other end of the roof.

They flew into the air.

"Sensei!"

The eyes of Harutora and the others widened and he ran to the edge of the roof. He ignored Kon who tried to stop them, leaning his body to look down. Below them, the black-clothed and the white-clothed Onmyouji were tangled together, rapidly approaching the ground.

"Hokuto!"

Natsume shouted, her black hair in a mess.

Responding to Natsume's summons, a golden light appeared and lengthened into a bright trail, materializing next to the two of them. But, was it in time? The emerged dragon dove after them, thrusting its nose in the gap between the two and the ground right before they hit the ground.

The dragon grabbed hold onto the clothes of white-clothed Onmyouji - Ohtomo. Bending its body around, it pulled up on Ohtomo's body with all its power. Then, the dragon's body crashed onto the road of the main entrance.

Doman hit the ground at the same time, just happening to smash into the sedan. The car roof was squashed under the intense collision of the old man's body, and the windshield glass was shattered.

Hokuto threw out its own body and smashed open the road, creating lag on its body which rippled across it. In that way, it used its own body as a shield, reducing the impact Ohtomo received by as much as possible. After finally stopping, Hokuto put Ohtomo on the ground and listlessly laid its long body on the ground as if complaining about its exhaustion.

"Sensei!"

Ohtomo was safe and sound.

He seemed to be conscious, and tried to get up after falling onto the ground, but sat on the ground with a 'plop' of failure, looking around.

"Really..... He went way too far.....!"

Touji spoke warmly. It had been a long time since Harutora's good friend's voice had been so excited.

But the excitement of Harutora and the others was extinguished in the following moment.

On the crushed sedan:

".....As I said, 'it's not enough'....."

Doman stood up.

☆

Glass was scattered on the ground at the Onmyou Academy entrance around the destroyed automatic doors, as if there had just been a robbery.

The roof black sedan stopped in front of the door was caved in and the glass was shattered. On top of this wrecked sedan, a black-clothed old man - no, he was already a 'thing' that no longer looked like an old man - stood up slowly.

He looked at Ohtomo who had fallen with him along with the dragon that had saved him.

"......You observed this old man's true colors, and still chose to push me down? That kind of attack is meaningless. The suffocation attack that you didn't hesitate to curse me with just now should have been enough to prove that....."

The old man's body was already completely destroyed. But Doman's aura forcefully supported the movement of his remaining body.

Hokuto, who lay on the road, frantically rose to fly at a low altitude, baring its claws and fangs and glaring as if angrily roaring 'You'll regret taking advantage of me before!'.

But Ohtomo lightly stroked Hokuto's chin with his hand, as if to appease the giant huffy dragon.

He stood up shakily.

Ohtomo seemed to be at his limits. The movement method he had applied had vanished, so he forced his body to stand and face Doman. Doman muttered upon seeing Ohtomo like this.

"You pulled me away to protect your students? That kind of action is admirable, but your trump cards are used up. How pitiful. No, how regretful. You pulled this old man into such a crisis, but in the end it was as a teacher, not as a practitioner?"

Doman's voice was neither humorous, nor was it mocking. He seemed to be sincerely remorseful. But if he were a mitama or some kind of similar being, such an extreme attitude was understandable.

Mitama were the accumulated feelings of people. Only a soul that held desire could form the core of a mitama. If Doman's desire was 'magic', then everything else was trivial to him.

Ohtomo stared unmovingly at Doman.

Just like when they had first confronted each other, he wasn't angry, resentful, or scared. His penetrating look resembled a priest who was carrying out a ritual - a priest facing a 'god'.

"...No worries."

Ohtomo revealed a light smile, replying to Doman's regrets.

"You know, I was originally a Mystical Investigator. Human opponents are one thing, but it's really troublesome to face spiritual disasters. As the saying goes, use the right tool for the job - well, I'll let you enjoy the taste of my hidden trump card."

Then.

Doman also noticed it.

His neck twisted. In the other direction of the Onmyou Academy, on the other end of the paved road that extended straight into the distance.

A strong aura was suddenly rapidly approaching.

With the rumbling noise of an engine, a motorcycle whipped up the air, spewing heat and approaching fast over the asphalt road. The sound of exhaust near the ground even reached the front of the Onmyou Academy.

A young man with sharp eyes and a sword on his waist sat on the motorcycle. He was the Independent Exorcist Kogure Zenjirou. Kogure, who had been contacted by Ohtomo beforehand, had left the Onmyou Agency on his own and was the first to come to the Onmyou Academy. The Onmyouji who had resolutely performed the Yamantaka method were the squad members that he had brought.

After Kogure saw Doman, his hands left the handlebars of his motorcycle and he drew the sword on his waist. The flashing white blade reflected the light, as if the blade were on fire. This was Kogure's beloved sword 'Second Norimune', also named the 'Demon Sword'. It was the divine sword that the first of the eight great tengu - Tarobo of Atago[19] - guarded.

Kogure grasped the hilt of the sword with both hands, looking at Doman without any hesitation.

He breathed in sharply:

"Oh great tengu, small tengu, twelve tengu, umana tengu, thousands of tengu. First the great tengu, Tarobo of Mount Atago, Jirobo of the Hira Mountains, Sojobo of Mount Kurama, Hoshobo of Mount Hiei, Kakukaibo of Lake Yokokawa, Daranibo of Mount Fuji, Tokobo of Mount Nikko, Konkobo of Mount Haguro, Nikkobo of Mount Myogi, Tsukubahoin of Hitachi Province, Buzenbo of Mount Hiko--"[20]

This was the 'Tengu scripture' of the 'Secret Mantra Prayer'. The motorcycle accelerated again. Kogure's motorcycle was a mechanical shikigami that could transform, and the shikigami housed in the motorcycle - a crow tengu - echoed the incantation, raising its strength.

Of course, the 'Demon Sword' was no exception.

He didn't just use magical energy from his own body. Kogure even received the magical energy of Yamantaka from the pentagram in the sky, taking it into his blade.

Yamantaka had dealings with the legendary tengu - especially Tarobo, who guarded the 'Demon Sword'. In the distant past, when Empress Somedono was possessed by Tarobo who had fallen into the Tengu realm[21], a renowned monk Souou subdued it using Yamantaka's magic. After that, it was said that Tarobo converted to the Buddhism that had liberated him. The divine sword guided the magical energy that gathered to its blade as if it knew this legend.

The blade of the 'Demon Sword' released a white light.

The gathered magical energy was refined, burned, and beaten, finally forming a giant blade longer than Kogure's height. Even if a true oni stood ahead of him, it would probably flee in a panic.

Kogure Zenjirou of the Twelve Divine Generals was known as the 'Heavenly Sword'.

His fierce sword magic greatly complemented that name. It scattered grains of light, splitting the air. He and the motorcycle raced towards the Onmyou Academy.

"...One hundred twenty five thousand five hundred in total, all of the tengu arrive to scatter demons at their will. On aromaya tengu sumanki sowaka, on hirahiraken, hirakennou sowaka! [22]"

Doman quickly put up a barrier.

Kogure cut towards the barrier and Doman inside it.

He swung the 'Demon Sword' from the motorcycle. The slash containing all of the 'Heavenly Sword's strength easily cut open Doman's barrier, cutting into the black-clothed Onmyouji and the sedan beneath him. The magical-energy-carrying wind following the blade swept into a whirlwind, and Doman was caught in the whirlwind as it violently rushed towards the academy building.

The giant magical energy that was released threw the surrounding aura in disarray. The sedan was cut in two, with the bottom of the car falling onto the ground. Doman, who stood on the sedan, was battered back and forth by the storm of aura.

Kogure turned the front of the motorcycle, stopping it in a position where he and Ohtomo could pincer attack Doman. He lifted his blade and dismounted.

"...It ends here, Ashiya Doman."

As the remains of the magic he had just used, a holy aura still filled Kogure's body as if he were a descended war god. Though the magic in the blade of the 'Demon Sword' in his hands had already disappeared, there was still a strong magical energy left, and its strength overflowed outwards. The shining blade took aim at the enemy.

The 'special forces' of spiritual disaster purification and the proud elite of the Exorcist Bureau.

This was his true power.

On the other hand, Ohtomo stood unsteadily across from Kogure, his body leaning on Hokuto's head. Hokuto was therefore unable to move, and though it wanted to charge forward and rend, in the end it could only roll its eyes, looking back and forth between Ohtomo and Doman. Probably failing to notice the dragon's dissatisfaction, Ohtomo didn't move his gaze from Doman for a moment.

After the storm of aura ended, Doman still hadn't fallen.

A giant new gash had been cut from his shoulder to his chest. Moreover, Kogure's strike just now hadn't just harmed his flesh. It had even dispersed the ancient aura floating around Doman in a flash.

But the wounds to the aura were different. The aura that formed 'him' slowly dispersed from the area of the wound like needlework being undone.

"......Nnn....."

A voice like a damaged flute came from inside the old man's body. Kogure readied his sword and Ohtomo's lips tightened, his face solemn.

But,

"......I've.....lost....."

Doman admitted his defeat.

It was probably an illusion, but his weak voice seemed to show a feeling of satisfaction. At the same time, it was the first time up to this point that his expressionless face revealed a smile, as if to seal that illusion in place.

Kogure looked at Ohtomo. Ohtomo nodded lightly, leaving Hokuto's side on wobbly legs and expending his last energy to stretch his back.

He bowed to Doman. After seeing his companion's actions, the fighting spirit burning in Kogure's heart vanished into thin air.

But unlike the ordinary teacher Ohtomo, Kogure's work wasn't finished after defeating the enemy. Doman had been designated as the dangerous individual 'D' by the Onmyou Agency, and there were many things to ask of him.

Kogure didn't get careless, taking a step while facing Doman.

"......Ashiya Doman. There's something I'd like to confirm with you. After you admit defeat, I'd like you to give up resisting and surrender peacefully. If you can accept magic binding, you can be treated immediately - the safety of your spiritual body can be ensured."

Kogure encouraged Doman to surrender. Ohtomo also watched for Doman's reply with a tense expression.

Doman didn't respond immediately.

But,

"......I suppose so..... The winner should do as he pleases..... Then....."

Kogure showed an expression of incomprehension for a moment, then smiled unconsciously. Ohtomo was a bit astonished, but was immediately relieved.

In the next moment.

Light came from behind the sedan--

The car exploded.

The sound of the explosion rumbled and flame scattered in all directions. The two cut halves of the car flew into the air. The shockwave spread out in a circle, and Kogure and Ohtomo were sent flying. The motorcycle housing a shikigami and Hokuto grabbed Kogure and Ohtomo respectively.

"What--"

"...!"

When the two of them looked ahead again, the ground was shaking and dust was flying.

Kogure and Ohtomo were dumbfounded. The smell of gasoline filled the front of the Onmyou Academy, and black smoke rose from the exploded sedan.

The explosion clearly wasn't caused by magic. Someone had installed a bomb on the sedan. Doman had been above the point of the explosion, and his body had already become ashes. Without flesh to act as a vessel, Doman's aura had probably scattered at the same time his body had been destroyed.

"H, How can that be. .....Why?"

"....."

Kogure couldn't figure out, and Ohtomo didn't say a word, his eyes also wide.

The two who had taken the shockwave head-on were hurt all over, but it was a fortune among misfortune that they still lived. Deducing from the facts before them, the explosion just now hadn't been aimed at the two of them, but had targeted Doman instead.

They realized that he wouldn't possibly have committed suicide from his attitude just now. He had been killed by someone.

But, who? Who exactly was it?

".....Could it be....."

Ohtomo, being supported by Hokuto, murmured quietly.

But he had already reached his limits. Ohtomo slowly lost consciousness as he looked at the burning remains of the sedan in front of him.

Part 3

The roof of a certain building. Hirata watched the academy building in the distance with one hand propped on a railing.

After he sent out the explosion code, he put his phone away back in his suit pocket. He pressed his right hand to the eyelid of his right eye, releasing his vision-strengthening magic.

".....The outcome was unexpected."

He spoke to himself quietly.

To him, Yakou's 'Raven's Wing' was worth taking some risks. Moreover, he could also stimulate the Onmyou Academy on the side - and the reincarnated Yakou - so it was meaningful in that aspect. Hence, he had decided to help Doman formulate the plans for this operation.

But to think that Doman had lost. That was truly outside of his expectations. The bomb he had installed in the sedan was one of the insurance measures he had prepared for eventualities. But beforehand, he had never thought he would use it to deal with this kind of situation.

"I didn't think 'Shadow' could bring that much into play. How fearsome, senpai. It was a huge mistake to let you leave the Mystical Investigators - but to me, it was great luck."

In the end, he had finally sealed Doman's mouth, so the outcome wasn't that bad.

He had experience of battling together with Doman several times in the past, but it was always because they shared an interest. He definitely wasn't 'comrades' with Doman. Needless to say, both Hirata and Doman became dangerous existences to each other whose intentions couldn't be grasped. Hirata and the others constantly toiled to strengthen their powers, and now an abnormal being like Ashiya Doman had been becoming a bigger threat day by day.

"The curse is a double-edged sword..... Could it be that you, who broke the barrier together, don't feel any resentment, Priest?"

Hirata looked in the direction of the Onmyou Academy, speaking to himself in an indifferent voice. There was no sympathy in his cold look, nor was there excitement. It was as empty as a vacuum.

But,

"...Did you kill him?"

A voice came from behind him.

Hirata instantly turned around and simultaneously threw a charm. But before he threw the charm and chanted an incantation, he was attacked by a dense miasma and his magic crumbled.

The high-density miasma could interfere with a magic charm just by touching it.

No, it was demonic aura.

This giant man leaned his back against the wall next to the rooftop entrance. He was close to two meters tall, and had a strong, well-built body.

His bright golden hair, seemingly foreign-blooded face, and unruly movements hid a fearless charm that emitted danger, making those who saw him feel an extreme, abnormal nervousness and interest towards him.

But Hirata's gaze stared at the man's left arm. The man wore a suit without a tie, and of his upper body that was wrapped in a jacket, only his left sleeve swayed lightly with the wind, with nothing in it.

Hirata breathed deeply.

'He' had been appearing around Doman - he had already received such reports.

Also, he had a strong demonic aura of the sort that would make one uneasy just from facing it. No doubt. Hirata realized the true identity of this man.

On the other hand, the man had no interest in Hirata's reaction.

"I've known that old man for a long time. .....What do I do now?"

He looked indifferently in the direction of the Onmyou academy, muttering quietly. He spoke a bit strangely, perhaps deliberately questioning Hirata, or possibly just 'complaining' a bit to Hirata who had killed his old acquaintance.

But even so, this man's words were still a bit inexplicable.

".....What do you mean?"

".....Exactly what I said."

After the man replied like this, he turned his back to Hirata, grasping the handle of the door to the exit. He seemed to want to leave.

In the current situation, it would obviously be great luck for Hirata if this man just left. If he were a cat, it would probably count as one of his nine lives. Hirata wasn't stupid enough to fail to distinguish the level of the situation in front of him.

But Hirata still couldn't accept that 'he' was leaving like this.

He bit his lip, forcefully suppressing his momentary hesitation.

"Kakug--!"[23]

He suddenly halted after saying half of it.

The demonic aura that emanated from the man whose back faced him violently assaulted Hirata. Hirata's heart stopped beating for a while.

The man looked back over his shoulder, his eyes narrowed into slits. The cold gaze that shot from within pierced through Hirata. They clearly weren't the eyes of a human.

"Don't call out my name however you like."

After the man said this, he opened the door and left.

He closed the door. The demonic aura on the roof gradually thinned.

But Hirata still couldn't move for some time after this.

Cold sweat ran down his back, but a fearless smile still appeared on his pale face.

"......It is, but it also isn't....."

After a while, Hirata finally sighed. He took out the phone that he had just returned to his pockets, beginning to report to someone.

Doman's exit was also an opportunity. Many thoughts began spinning. Only those who created chaos could enjoy the most delicious fruits.

★

After the support teams from the Onmyou Agency and the Exorcist Bureau arrived, the crisis in the Onmyou Academy was finally relieved.

Since the building was wrecked, there were still a huge number of policemen in the academy as well as the news media that had come to report. The Onmyou Agency was probably in a similar situation. It was impossible to imagine exactly how much time they would need to calm the commotion completely.

But they had made it through the crisis before them, and they didn't want to think about any extra things. Harutora and the others were taken to shelter in the principal's office. They sat on the sofa or chairs, their minds blank.

The teachers were currently inside the Onmyou Academy checking the building's safety and getting the students who were taking shelter underground, preparing to let them go back home. Some people had been injured, but fortunately the injuries weren't severe. But there were quite a few first and second-year students

who suffered spiritual encumbrance, and in particular psychological problems had shown up in many first-year students. The teachers managed to console these students, but there would probably be many students who submitted an academy withdrawal application after three months because of this incident.

The other teachers didn't have time to rest either. They needed to answer the questions of the Onmyou Agency and the police, deal with the media, and clean up the wrecked academy building. Simply put, everyone was busy with the clean-up work afterwards.

But Harutora, Natsume, Touji, Tenma, Kyouko, and Suzuka were located outside of this racket, focusing on calming their state of mind. After a long-duration magical battle, the excitement still lingered inside them.

"H-Harutora-sama. The tea is ready."

"Oh..... Thanks."

Harutora sat on the sofa used to receive guests, gratefully accepting the tea that Kon had made. The most moving part was that she had even prepared portions for the other five. Everyone took Kon's green tea, either giving their thanks or reaching out impolitely. Harutora sipped slowly while looking at the shikigami busily running about.

The final moment as he had been looking down at Doman from the roof was still branded in his mind. Harutora was still clueless as to what exactly had happened, but he vaguely felt that something was rapidly creeping behind his back. It wasn't just something simple like the background Doman had been hiding, but more like the general darkness of the magical world.

Doman had probably just showed a corner of this giant darkness. From the position where Harutora and the other stood, they still couldn't see that vast darkness. Harutora hadn't felt it, but his intuition said so.

But the splendid magic that the black-clothed Onmyouji, Ohtomo, and Kogure had shown moved Harutora's heart more than Doman's death. Even if he recalled it now while sitting on the sofa, it still made his chest throb. Strong power, and

the masterful technique to control that power. Bringing aura, experience, training, the soul, and one's own body all together to bring forth the essence of magic. Onmyoudou.

It felt a bit surprising, but Harutora still believed that this feeling was extremely 'beautiful'. It was a pure 'beauty', surpassing any causes and reasons.

"....."

After finishing the tea in his hands, he stared blankly. His mind had originally been empty, but thinking that he couldn't stop constantly spilled forth. This was probably post-traumatic stress that had been released after extreme tension. Harutora didn't forcefully suppress his thoughts, letting his thinking expand and rupture like foam.

Harutora wasn't the only one without many words.

Natsume was the same as him, blankly staring at the green tea's hue. Touji, who had put on the bandanna again, had his eyes closed and was thinking seriously about something. Kyouko, who had trouble calming down, was pacing inside the room, looking at the spines of the books placed on the shelves.

Tenma stared at the shikigami charms they had picked up from the roof. These were the Swallow Whip charms that Ohtomo had used at the end. They had originally been cheap mass-produced products, but he stared at them intently, as if they were books of prophecy that suggested his future.

Suzuka was in an impatient mood. She had been playing with her phone since a while ago, seeming to be gathering information on the internet. But she didn't mention any related information. Hence, gathering information probably wasn't her goal, it was probably simply to pass the time and avert her attention. The seal that Ohtomo had 'hacked' before had now returned to normal.

It was a strange time where they wanted to calm down but couldn't calm down. After dividing the tea, Kon was silent for a while, but then said "Th-Then--" and dematerialized after a while.

Ten minutes passed. The sound of a door knock finally resounded in the principal's office.

After opening the door, Principal Kurahashi walked into the room.

As soon as she opened her mouth:

"News has come from the hospital. Ohtomo-sensei has regained consciousness."

Harutora and the others stood up simultaneously.

"Is his condition alright?"

"Hmm, it seems that he's just overly fatigued. He even asked me to relay the message that 'today's training is cancelled'."

Harutora and the others sat back down with a plop after hearing that.

Smiling inadvertently, Harutora said:

"That teacher really is a clown. He's half-dead right now!"

Everyone smiled in in approval after hearing Harutora's joke.

No, not everyone. Suzuka stood from the sofa.

"......Who exactly is that man?"

He asked the principal.

"He wouldn't be able to do this much if he were just a former Mystical Investigator. Most importantly, I couldn't possibly not know someone who could do that. Who exactly is that man?"

Probably out of her pride as a Divine General, Suzuka stared at the principal, unable to conceal the impatience in her heart.

But the principal smiled slightly, cleverly diverting the topic.

"If you're interested, ask him directly. All I can say is that he is a proud teacher of the Onmyou Academy."

Suzuka furrowed her brows, glaring resentfully at the principal without continuing to ask.

It turned to Kyouko to ask questions in her place.

"Grandma. You said that you would explain to us afterwards, right? Please explain now. That Onmyouji - Ashiya Doman - why did he come to attack? Judging by your tone on the roof, you probably knew his goal, right?"

Harutora also thought of it when he heard Kyouko's words. The principal had indeed mentioned 'the thing you're looking for' while conversing with Doman on the roof, and Doman had replied that he had left it to his shikigami.

Unlike how she had been after hearing Suzuka's question just now, the principal didn't change the topic this time.

She nodded at her granddaughter, to whom she had promised this.

"Yesterday night, he seems to have sent a letter to the Onmyou Agency building. He said that tomorrow - which is today - he would go to steal the 'Raven's Wing'."

"......Raven's Wing?"

The unexpected reason took Kyouko aback, and of course Harutora and Natsume were the same. During their camp this month, the name of this object had once become the topic of the six of them.

Natsume's expression changed.

"Wait. Isn't Yakou's Raven's Wing kept in the Onmyou Agency? Then why did he come to attack the Onmyou Academy?"

The Onmyou Agency and the Onmyou Academy had been attacked at almost the same time, but Doman himself had appeared here. Hence, it was certain that the Onmyou Academy had been his true target.

"No. The Raven's Wing kept in the Onmyou Agency is fake. The genuine article... was once sealed in the storage room of the academy building."

Finally, the principal casually spoke the truth. Her tone was relaxed, but the contents were definitely not a joke. Natsume and the others saw her heart waver.

In his surprise, Tenma said:

"B-But, why? Didn't Principal deny Ashiya Doman's questions the whole time? Why did you lie so readily!?"

Though there hadn't been many personal injuries, the Onmyou Academy had still suffered heavy damage. In particular, many students had been attacked by Doman for unknown reasons and had been caught in a life-threatening situation. Some had even received spiritual encumbrance. The Onmyou Academy would be thoroughly discredited as an institution that had a duty to protect them.

Even if they really didn't want to give the Raven's Wing to Doman, they shouldn't have weighed that against the safety of the students. At the least, they should have obediently given it to him when he invaded, right?

It wasn't just Tenma who couldn't agree with the principal's methods. Harutora was the same.

But the principal furrowed her brows, sighing deeply.

"I understand Tenma-san's thoughts, and I agree. But I didn't say any lies. The Raven's Wing was kept here once, but it is no longer in my hands now. It's extremely shameful, but I only realized after Ashiya Doman sent his notice - the Raven's Wing had been taken away from here. At that time, it was already yesterday night."

"It was taken away? The Raven's Wing?"

"Yes. I already have a clue about who took it away."

After the principal spoke, she took out a piece of paper from her sleeve.

She didn't look at Kyouko next to her. Instead, she gave it to Natsume. Natsume received the paper from the principal's hands in her surprise.

As Harutora peered over from the side, Touji, Suzuka, Kyouko, and Tenma also leaned over.

There was a sentence on the piece of paper.

"I'm borrowing this."

Harutora and the others craned their necks.

"......This is?"

The principal sighed again after hearing Natsume's confused question.

"The person who took the Raven's Wing being kept here left this paper in its place. What do you think?"

"Even..... if you ask me....."

"The handwriting. Do you recognize it?"

With a strange expression on her face, Natsume looked at the paper she had been given again. In the end, there were only a few words on the paper, and it was hard to think of any clue--

She suddenly raised her head.

"Could it be my father.....!"

The principal nodded confirmation to the speechless Natsume. Harutora next to her gaped.

"N, Natsume's father?"

"......Very sorry for not telling you. Actually, he visited the Onmyou Academy last month - when you were all away from Tokyo for the practical skills camp. It was quite a sudden visit..... Thinking back now, that was when he took away the Raven's Wing."

"B, But, why? Why did Natsume's father take the Raven's Wing? And he didn't tell the principal--"

Harutora felt chilled as he spoke. It was the matter that Suzuka had brought up during the night of the camp last month.

...'It's said that using the Raven's Wing can judge whether someone is Yakou's reincarnation.'

The other five people probably thought of the same thing. They all looked at Natsume. The blood drained from Natsume's face and she stared at the paper in her hands.

But,

"......He probably foresaw the attack today, so he took away the Raven's Wing beforehand. Though not everyone knows it, he's an extremely excellent diviner."

"B, But."

"Think about it. It was a month ago that he took away the Raven's Wing. If he had 'other goals', they would definitely be realized immediately. He's the kind of person to act decisively."

The principal's words seemed to reassure the six students.

She probably also knew about what Suzuka had said regarding reincarnation. Harutora secretly peeked at the principal's expression, but it was hard to read her true thoughts.

"Well, in the end, it's thanks to him that Ashiya Doman didn't get the Raven's Wing. It's probably the best choice for him to guard it for now."

"Why? If Natsume's father took away the Raven's Coat to guard it against Doman's attack, shouldn't we urge Natsume's father to hurry up and return it, since Doman's dead now?"

Touji, who had been silent until now, suddenly asked her sharply, probably feeling suspicious of the principal's words. After Touji brought it up, Harutora also noticed this.

The six of them silently turned the question over to the principal.

The principal looked at the faces of the six in turn.

"This was also a message from Ohtomo-sensei."

She opened her mouth and spoke solemnly.

"'We're not sure right now whether Ashiya Doman is truly dead'. Also, 'it's calm for now, but we can't become negligent or careless because of it'. ...Ah, that's enough. I fully understand what everyone wants to say. I'll convey everyone's message as your representative."

The principal spoke in a vexed tone as she faced the wide-eyed, speechless audience.

Hey hey, don't joke around!

Part 4

Deep in the night.

It rained with a pitter patter. The sky, which had been unstable for the whole day, had finally whipped into a storm after the sun set, and the rain that came afterwards showed no signs of weakening.

The room occupying the roof of a high-rise apartment in Tokyo seemed like a complex maze. Strange objects were placed everywhere, creating an ominous and bewitching atmosphere.

A girl silently walked in the corridor of this room.

The girl walked to her destination by herself, not misled by the maze-like construction of this place. Dim light that easily induced illusions swayed like mirages on the girl's white clothing.

The girl arrived in a small den in the deepest part of the maze.

The room, the walls, and even the ceiling was covered in bookshelves. The objects on the tatami were scattered, and there was an altar set inside. Inside this den, the only place tatami was visible was in a small desk in front of the altar.

The girl sat in this small space.

She looked at the desk, where there was a folded paper and a memo addressed to this girl.

She read the memo first, then emotionlessly muttered 'so annoying'. Then, she reached out to take the folded paper.

She perused it roughly. The contents were a continuous incantations, and the first line went like this.

'I ask to offer myself to Taizan Fukun, the lord of the underworld.'

The girl nodded after checking the contents, carefully re-folding the paper recording the oration of the ritual. She looked at the memo again, reading it slowly this time. After reading it, she muttered "really so annoying" again, then "I'm your disciple, not your shikigami."

The girl knew what she should do.

After rising, she left the desk where the memo and oration had been placed.

Then, she looked at the altar in front of her.

There were extremely unpleasant things placed on the altar.

It was a giant, very tall rectangular prism.

This was an industrial freezer, but there were many magics cast on it. It wasn't a simple object.

The girl carefully 'looked' at the magic cast on the freezer. Then, she started carefully peeling off the charms stuck on the surface one by one.

After peeling off all of the charms, she leaned forward to grasp the handle. Chanting the incantation on the memo, she released the final seal.

Then,

"I hope a little girl shows up at least."

The girl opened the freezer door.

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